



March 1996

## Bear Bryant: Symbol for an Embattled South

Andrew Doyle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 32, no.1, March 1996, p.72-86

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## *Bear Bryant: Symbol for an Embattled South*

By ANDREW DOYLE

IN 1961 THE UNIVERSITY of Alabama football team won eleven straight games and ended the season ranked number one in both wire service polls. A punishing defense led by All-American linebacker Lee Roy Jordan dominated opponents, giving up only three touchdowns and twenty-five points all year. On New Year's Day, 1962, the Crimson Tide capped its first national championship season in twenty years with a 10-3 victory over the University of Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl. A national football championship would have been an occasion for ecstatic celebration in the best of times, but the early 1960's could never have been mistaken for the best of times in Alabama.

The day after the Sugar Bowl victory, U. S. Representative Frank Boykin of Mobile expressed his unbounded joy in a rambling letter to Alabama head football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. He invoked the glorious martial tradition of the Confederacy declaring, "Your men stood like Stonewall Jackson," and added that "they should now name you not just Bear Bryant, but General Bear Bryant." Boykin effused at length about "the thrill that you and your marvelous, brilliant men" gave him, his family, and "our colored people that's [sic] done such a good job for us over the years" at his hunting lodge.

Yet Boykin believed that the Alabama victory provided him with something more practical than mere thrills. Since the 1920's southern politicians and boosters had touted successful southern college football teams in their ceaseless campaign to improve the South's negative image. "Well, the Alabama football team showed the world, the whole wide world what our men could do. I doubt if we could have gotten half of the publicity or advertisement that you and your great team gave us had we spent a million dollars." While this earlier generation of boosters generally saw the public relations value of football in terms of economic development, Boykin had larger political issues in mind. He saw the Crimson Tide as a natural rallying point for the embattled white South and as a means of securing outside allies in the escalating struggle over civil rights. "There was so much joy, there was so much pleasure that you gave all of the home folks and people all over the

South and people all over this Nation that want us to keep some part of our way of life."<sup>1</sup>

Bryant and his championship team had become potent symbols of pride and cultural vitality to white southerners in the midst of a profound social transformation. The "southern way of life" was a common euphemism for the system of legally sanctioned white supremacy, and Boykin and other political leaders were engaged in an increasingly desperate effort to stave off its demise. By 1962, massive resistance was collapsing under the combined weight of federal court orders and grass roots agitation by southern blacks. Alabama and Mississippi alone were holding out. At the end of 1961, they were the only states that had yet to desegregate a single public school. Boykin and his peers were hoping to effect a miraculous defeat of the second Reconstruction by reviving the "Right Fork" alliance with conservative northerners that had thwarted the first Reconstruction. Boykin's naive faith that the prowess of the Crimson Tide could somehow convince the rest of the nation of the decency and viability of the dying racial caste system is a testament to the talismanic power that southerners ascribed to college football.<sup>2</sup>

The protracted death throes of Jim Crow produced a profound sense of social dislocation for the majority of southern whites who believed that segregation was both God-ordained and a practical social necessity. Yet the Civil Rights Revolution proceeded in tandem with the less dramatic but nonetheless significant "Bulldozer Revolution." The unprecedented post World War II economic boom was finally lifting the South from a century of underdevelopment, but rapid growth created new problems as it alleviated others.<sup>3</sup> Total personal income of Alabamians rose by a staggering 554 per cent between 1939 and 1959, but this newfound prosperity was dissolving the communal bonds and stable values of the traditional southern folk culture.<sup>4</sup> Fully two-thirds of the young adults born in rural Alabama and coming of age in the immediate postwar era abandoned the countryside for the cities or left the region entirely.<sup>5</sup> This flight from the soil was similar in scope to

*Abbreviations:*

HSC: William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama  
BMA: Paul W. Bryant Museum Archives, University of Alabama

1. Frank Boykin to Paul Bryant, January 2, 1962, HSC, Rose Papers, 6-83A7680-21.

2. The desperate and destructive efforts of southern politicians to defend the system of legal segregation are discussed in Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969).

3. C. Vann Woodward discusses the mixed blessings of the Bulldozer Revolution in "The Search for Southern Identity," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 34 (1958), 321-38. See also Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sun Belt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991); and Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1995).

4. Between 1939 and 1959, Alabama's per capita income rose from a dismal forty-seven percent of the national average (roughly the same proportion that had obtained since the end of the Civil War) to a more respectable sixty-five percent. Alabama Business Research Council, *Transition in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1962), 5, 12.

5. Seventy percent of Alabamians lived in rural areas in 1940; a mere twenty years later, this figure had declined to forty-five percent. In rural Alabama, the only age cohorts to grow in size between 1940 and 1960 were those of persons older than 44. The outmigration of young people in those years was far greater than that of the decade between 1930 and 1940, as the generally rising level of prosperity in urban areas offered a pre-

the enclosure of the English countryside in the seventeenth century and the depopulation of rural Ireland in the wake of the Famine.<sup>6</sup> Rapid urbanization disrupted family and community bonds and sapped the vitality of the rural culture that had traditionally informed virtually every facet of southern life. The seductive allure of consumerism and the subtly powerful influence of the electronic media hastened the decline of traditional cultural and religious norms. The endemic poverty of the Cotton South was disappearing, but the agrarian society of traditional work rhythms, family stability, and unifying religious values was disappearing along with it.

Yet this impressive expansion of material wealth had not erased the moral stigma that the region had borne since the Civil War. The South had lost its Depression era designation as the nation's number one economic problem just in time to acquire the status of national pariah during the era of the black freedom struggle. A nation which had yet to confront fully the hard realities of racial injustice still comfortably assumed that bigotry was strictly a southern problem. The growing ostracism of the South in the years after the *Brown* decision had dashed the southern progressive nostrum that economic growth would mitigate the South's status as the unrighteous "Other" in the national morality play. White southerners desperately wished to convince the rest of the nation that their society was a part of the republic of virtue and reacted with a combination of anguish and anger when that recognition was not forthcoming.

Paul Bryant and his national champions possessed the power to soothe the anguish and give expression to the righteous anger. They were both a proud symbol of the southern virtues that the rest of the nation refused to recognize and a defiant statement that southerners could command respect that was not freely granted. Embattled Alabamians reeling under the weight of enormous social, political, and economic changes embraced Bryant and the Crimson Tide with the passion of true believers. A national football championship spoke for itself; it was undeniable proof of achievement and legitimacy for a state that historically led the nation only in adult illiteracy and infant mortality.

Commercialized sport is a richly complex cultural text that resonates so powerfully in modern society because the games and their heroes incorporate a varied and often contradictory web of symbolic meanings.<sup>7</sup> Southern college football since its inception had provided southerners with a means of defining their collective identity in relation to the dominant national culture. Progressive southerners adopted the fashionable sport of the northeastern elite in the early 1890's as a cultural component of their program of modern-

vously unavailable level of economic opportunity. *U. S. Census of Population, 1960*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 2-28; *U. S. Census of Population, 1940*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 211-12.

6. Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), 276.

7. Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993).

ization. The Machine Age sport of "scientific football" provided a perfect vehicle for bringing bourgeois values to a region striving for inclusion into the American cultural and economic mainstream. Yet postbellum southerners steeped in the mythology of the Lost Cause also imbued this Yankee game with the romantic trappings of the Cavalier myth and exalted their football heroes as modern incarnations of Confederate warriors. Southern football thus represented the New South vision of sectional reconciliation and dynamic industrial growth within a modern, rationally ordered society while simultaneously exemplifying the chivalrous ideals of the Old South.<sup>8</sup>

The iconic image of Paul Bryant and his teams during the early 1960's embodied the complex and often radically contradictory impulses of this divided southern mind. Bryant repeatedly paid sincere homage to the simpler values of the agrarian South of his boyhood. He grew up in extreme poverty in Moro Bottom, Arkansas, and often spoke in reverential tones about how his mother's piety and determination enabled the family to persevere. His early teams at Alabama were comprised mostly of undersized country boys who, like their coach in his playing days, excelled more by dint of superior endurance and willpower than natural athletic gifts. His 1961 team averaged a scant 199 pounds, and he proudly referred to them as his "little bitty boys." Bryant modestly refused to claim credit for the stellar performance of his players, instead praising the parents, preachers, teachers, and high-school coaches that had produced such fine young men. He lauded the "mamas and papas" of his players so often that that phrase became a buzzword throughout the state. Alabamians who had left their childhood homes in the countryside for growing cities and suburbs and their relatives still living in the declining countryside saw Bryant and his teams as proof that the older values could survive in a changing world. In 1960 Benny Marshall, the sports editor of *The Birmingham News*, observed, "Paul Bryant often speaks of his boys' raising and I applaud him. Upbringing does count." Two years later, Marshall declared that Bryant's players represented the "old, true values." Alabamians exalted their football champions as symbols of cultural vitality just as Americans frenetically lionized the Mercury astronauts in an effort to assuage their anxieties about the perceived weakness of the western democracies at the height of the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

Yet this homiletic deference to the simple values of a dying social order masked how Bryant and his teams also symbolized the new society rising to take its place. Bryant's life was a classic American success story. His keen intelligence, driving ambition, and obsessive desire to outwork his opponents

8. Edward L. Ayers describes the syncretic process by which the proponents of early southern football imbued the sport with the raiments of the southern tradition in *The Promise of the New South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 313-15; see also Andrew Doyle, "Causes Won, Not Lost: College Football and the Modernization of the American South," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 11 (Aug. 1994), 231-51.

9. *Birmingham News*, Nov. 16, 1960, 44; Jan. 11, 1963, 18. For Bryant's childhood, see Paul Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear: The Hard Life and Good Times of Alabama's Coach Bryant* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974). Geoffrey Norman explores the intense attachment that Alabamians formed with Bryant during the early 1960's in *Alabama Showdown: The Football Rivalry Between Alabama and Auburn* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 72-113.

enabled him to rise to the highest levels of the meritocratic and highly competitive world of commercialized sport. His 1960 book, *Building a Championship Football Team*, is a primer on the application of modern management techniques to the coaching profession. Bryant was also a millionaire businessman whose business ventures ranged from real estate, banking, and insurance to a meat packing plant and a car dealership, and he was an inveterate player in the stock and commodities markets. He may have reminisced about plowing furrows behind a mule in Arkansas, and recruited players who came from a similar background, but the desire to make that world a distant memory drove both the coach and his players to excel. The millions of urban and suburban southerners one or two generations removed from rural poverty saw in Bryant the embodiment of the best of the old and the best of the new. Any coach who won as consistently as Bryant could be assured of tremendous popularity, but his mythic status in southern culture rested in large measure on the eagerness of southerners to view him as an affirmation of their own values and virtues.<sup>10</sup>

Although Bryant prudently remained silent on the race issue, many of his fans made his all-white teams a symbol of white supremacy. Football, like virtually every other aspect of southern life in the early 1960's, was interpreted through the lens of racial politics. Bryant himself was a racial moderate who quietly aligned himself with the businessmen working for a peaceful end to segregation. He and University of Alabama President Frank Rose brokered a deal with Alabama's race-baiting Governor John Patterson that allowed Alabama to break the "Gentleman's Agreement" and compete against a racially integrated Penn State team in the 1959 Liberty Bowl. Yet Bryant's white players and the segregated university they represented took on a symbolic value that overshadowed the subtleties of Bryant's own moderate position on the continuum of southern racial politics. Like Frank Boykin, many southerners viewed the Crimson Tide's success as a vindication of the "southern way of life" and loved Bryant all the more for it. Yet an influential segment of non-southerners judged Bryant harshly precisely because the cultural text created by southern football fans contrasted so sharply with the evolving national consensus in support of civil rights.<sup>11</sup>

Bryant seemed to embody the worst northern fears of the South as a land of irrationality and violence. Since the antebellum era, the South had possessed a dual mythic image in the national consciousness. The enchanting spirit of moonlight and magnolias had a sinister mirror image that W. J. Cash called the "savage ideal." This shadowy underside of southern culture consisted of images of tobacco-chewing poor whites running amok, perpetrating unspeakable mayhem on hapless blacks or even each other as the mood

10. Paul Bryant, *Building a Championship Football Team* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960).

11. Charles Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, November 3, 1990; E. Culpeper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 61.

struck them. The brutal beatings of Freedom Riders in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery and the wave of bombings that earned a black neighborhood of Birmingham the nickname "Dynamite Hill" intensified this violent image, and formed the background for Bryant's first national championship season of 1961. Bryant and his all-white, predominantly rural-born team seemed to be the savage ideal personified. A critical mass of national opinion makers now defined the South as a national disgrace and a moral cesspool, and Bear Bryant became the embodiment of all they feared and despised about the region.<sup>12</sup>

Bryant was singled out by the national press as a fascinating but unsavory oddity produced by a region not fully assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. A 1961 *Time* profile labeled Bryant "a relentless and brutal taskmaster. He drinks Salty Dogs, runs up scores, browbeats sportswriters, cusses his players, and believes in corporal punishment—usually a size 12-D shoe applied to the seat of the pants." A *Sports Illustrated* article lauded the achievements of the national champions, but seemed uneasy about the team and its coach. It noted that the Alabama defense hit "with the viciousness of a pack of sharks" and added that "Bryant's image outside of Alabama . . . is that of a tyrant, a slave driver on the practice field, a recruiter without scruples, a ruthless opponent." Alabama journalists and politicians angrily dismissed the *Time* and *Sports Illustrated* articles as scurrilous attacks on a genuine southern hero by the biased northeastern media. In a press release entitled "Statement for *Time* Magazine," Frank Rose defended Bryant as "one of the finest men I have ever known." The sisters of the Alabama chapter of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority registered their dissent by hanging an effigy of *Time* at a pep rally.<sup>13</sup>

The Pavlovian defensiveness of most Alabamians to the attacks on Bryant demonstrated the bitter sectional hostilities engendered by the second Reconstruction. But a controversial incident in the 1961 Georgia Tech-Alabama game revealed ideological divisions within the white South that would prove crucial to the eventual southern acceptance of desegregation. Darwin Holt, an Alabama linebacker, illegally struck Georgia Tech halfback Chick Graning in the face with his elbow, breaking his jaw and knocking out several teeth. Holt and Bryant both apologized for the incident, but a swirling firestorm soon erupted. Georgia Tech head coach Bobby Dodd wrote Bryant, "Knowing you as I do, Bear, if Graning were your son and in the condition he is now in at the hospital, you would personally be searching out Holt in order to get revenge." Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield

12. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 44–45, 73–76, 137. For a discussion of the negative image of the South in the dominant national culture that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century, see George B. Tindall, "The Benighted South: Origins of a Modern Image," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 40 (Spring 1964), 281–94. See also Fred Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980). On the evolution of the image of the South held by late nineteenth-century northerners, see Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993).

13. "A Bear at 'Bama,'" *Time*, 78 (Nov. 17, 1961), 72; Roy Terrell, "The Bear and Alabama Come Out on Top," *Sports Illustrated*, 15 (Dec. 11, 1961), 20, 87; *Birmingham News*, Dec. 1, 1961, 10.

advised Frank Rose that “it would be unwise for the Alabama team to appear on the Tech Campus next year.”<sup>14</sup>

A bitter war of words erupted between Birmingham and Atlanta newspapers. Furman Bisher, the sports editor of *The Atlanta Journal*, called Holt “bestial,” asserting, “It is virtually a requirement that any young man who plays football for a Bryant team behave in a most violent manner.” Bisher issued a blanket indictment of Alabama itself, declaring that Holt’s behavior “represents the character of the sportsmanship of the state.”<sup>15</sup> The Birmingham papers accepted the challenge. “I’m Ashamed of Atlanta’s Vicious Orgy,” screamed a *News* headline, as if the entire city of Atlanta had conspired to defame Alabama’s hero. *News* sports editor Benny Marshall denounced the “propaganda machine in Atlanta . . . hammering away long after good newspapering or duty demanded.” He claimed that the *Journal* was guilty of “yellow journalism at its rankest. . . . Men with jaws a-drool, hungry for a kill” published material that was “infamous, disgraceful, indecent, [and] unworthy of the newspaper profession.”<sup>16</sup>

This angry invective was partly a natural response to the devastating injury to a popular player, and partly a reflection of an emotional football rivalry. But two similar incidents involving cheap shots that seriously injured other Southeastern Conference players had occurred the previous season without igniting anything approaching a comparable level of controversy.<sup>17</sup> The longstanding urban rivalry between Birmingham and Atlanta and the two cities’ antithetical visions of southern racial politics intensified the Holt-Graning controversy. Since the late nineteenth century, Atlanta and Birmingham had been bitter competitors for economic primacy in the Southeast. They were roughly the same size as late as 1940, but by 1961 metropolitan Atlanta was nearly twice the size of Birmingham. Racial politics was the key factor in Atlanta’s postwar growth and Birmingham’s stagnation.

A progressive-minded business and political elite dismantled legal segregation in Atlanta with an eye toward creating a favorable national image; Birmingham fought on until it became an international symbol of oppression and racist violence. Atlanta had peacefully desegregated its public schools and downtown stores by 1961; Birmingham would turn police dogs and fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators in 1963 in a last-ditch effort to prevent desegregation. Atlanta wooed and cultivated the national media in a skillful public relations campaign; an Alabama grand jury indicted *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury for criminal libel after he published an article critical of Birmingham. Atlanta was widely known as the “City Too Busy to Hate”; Birmingham was darkly referred to as “Bombingham.” Atlanta’s elite

14. HSC, Rose Papers, Special Subject File, “Alabama-Georgia Tech Football Game, November 18, 1961”; HSC, 6-80A3921-13.

15. *Atlanta Journal*, Nov. 20, 1961, 31; Nov. 21, 1961, 11, 29.

16. *Birmingham News*, Nov. 23, 1961, 35; Nov. 24, 1961, 13.

17. *Birmingham News*, Nov. 21, 1960, 32.



and its increasingly affluent and cosmopolitan middle class saw their city as an oasis of sanity and enlightenment amid the southern miasma of violence and backwardness. They were also annoyingly eager to trumpet this assertion to the world. A large number of white southerners bitterly resented Atlanta's success, its condescending air of superiority, and its unseemly eagerness to court Yankee approval and investment capital. Tradition-minded southerners reviled the memory of the scalawags who had sold out their southern heritage for Yankee money during Reconstruction, and many saw Atlanta's acquiescence in desegregation and its carefully cultivated image of racial moderation as a repetition of this shameful episode of southern history. A 1961 *Birmingham News* editorial noted that Atlanta's racially moderate Mayor Ivan Allen "would make Atlanta a mayor they would be proud of in Washington, New York, and Ghana."<sup>18</sup>

Bear Bryant was considered declass   by the New South progressives of Atlanta. He remained publicly committed to traditional southern values, and was portrayed as a redneck foil to the courtly Bobby Dodd of Georgia Tech. He didn't try, as Dodd did, to portray himself in the media as cosmopolitan and enlightened. Dodd was a tough southern coach, and his teams played a very physical brand of football, but, unlike Bryant, he never cultivated a tough guy image.<sup>19</sup>

Furman Bisher fired another salvo in October 1962 in a *Saturday Evening Post* article entitled "College Football is Going Berserk." Bisher denounced the increasing violence in college football and singled out Bryant as the worst offender. Alabamians, used to George Wallace's rhetoric about "carpetbaggin', scalawaggin' federal judges," were quick to see this latest chapter in the war with Atlanta as an unholy alliance of a renegade southerner and the perfidious Yankee press. Bryant sued Bisher and the *Post* for libel, but a *Birmingham News* columnist lamented the fact that Bryant was not able to dispense with the courts and deal with his tormentors using the time-honored methods of the southern gentleman:

In Andrew Jackson's good days, the "or else" might have implied pistols at dawn, or somebody might have reached for a convenient horsewhip, but in Bryant's case, the challenge meant the courts. . . . Bryant, who one hundred years ago would have ridden to Horseshoe Bend with Andrew Jackson, might personally have preferred the former, but, as alleged earlier, life is more complicated.<sup>20</sup>

Five months later, in March 1963, the *Post* published an article entitled "The Story of a College Football Fix," which accused University of Georgia Athletic Director Wally Butts of passing secret information about the

18. *Birmingham News*, Sept. 14, 1961, 11. See also *Birmingham News*, Aug. 18, 1961, 6; Sept. 3, 1961, A-10. *The Atlanta Constitution*, led by its liberal editor Ralph McGill, heaped scorn on Birmingham and Alabama as the embodiment of backwardness and bigotry. See *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1962, 4; Sept. 6, 1963, 4; Sept. 17, 1963, 1.

19. For Dodd's skill at cultivating an image of an easygoing man who ostensibly rejected the win-at-all-costs mentality so eagerly adopted by Bryant in the first half of his career, see "Football for Fun," *Time*, 60 (Nov. 24, 1952), 72; "The Happy Coach," 68 (Nov. 12, 1958), 83; *Birmingham News*, Nov. 29, 1952, 24.

20. *Birmingham News*, Oct. 17, 1962, 17.

Georgia team to Bryant eight days prior to the 1961 Alabama-Georgia game. The hated Bisher had once again teamed up with outsiders to attack Bryant. Once again, the vast majority of white Alabamians rallied instantly and unquestioningly to Bryant's defense. Governor George Wallace called the *Post* the "sorriest authority on truth." Frank Rose and the Alabama Board of Trustees each publicly affirmed their support of Bryant, and the state legislature passed a resolution condemning the *Post* for its "unfair" attack. *The Birmingham News* intoned, "Bryant has been under increasingly vitriolic attack by national publications as his success has soared." Bryant purchased time on television stations in four Alabama cities to deny any wrongdoing.<sup>21</sup>

Bryant and Butts each filed multimillion dollar lawsuits against the *Post*. The Butts case came to trial in August 1963 in U. S. District Court in Atlanta. The jury found the *Post* guilty of libel and awarded Butts over three million dollars in compensatory and punitive damages. A judge later reduced the award to \$400,000, but Butts and Bryant had been vindicated. Bryant settled both this suit and the one he had filed over Bisher's football violence article out of court for \$320,000. Bryant angrily concluded his testimony at the Butts trial with the assertion, "Taking their money is not good enough. Somebody ought to go to jail." While neither the *Post* editors nor the hated Bisher went to jail, Bryant stood as a genuine southern hero, righteously triumphing over his foes.<sup>22</sup>

Bryant's personal vindication occurred at the same time the state of Alabama was descending into what Howell Raines calls "the midnight of its humiliation."<sup>23</sup> The press accounts of the Butts trial competed for newspaper space with accounts of Wallace's infamous stand in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama. Three months earlier, the televised images of Bull Connor's fire hoses and police dogs had shocked the nation and the world. The nadir of this cycle of violence and hatred came in September 1963 when four black girls were killed by a bomb blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.<sup>24</sup>

The nation seethed with righteous anger at Alabama's endless parade of horrors, and, as the mythic hero of white Alabamians, Bryant once again became a lightning rod for criticism. *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Jim Murray protested that Bryant's team did not deserve the 1964 national championship because neither Alabama nor any of its 1964 opponents scheduled games with racially integrated teams. "So Alabama is the 'National

21. Frank Graham, Jr., "The Story of a College Football Fix," *Saturday Evening Post* (March 23, 1963), 80-87; *Birmingham News*, Mar. 16, 1961, 1; Mar. 22, 1963, 34; Aug. 12, 1963, 1; Aug. 31, 1963, 11.

22. James Kirby, *Fumble: Bear Bryant, Wally Butts and the Great College Football Scandal* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 34-35, 147-48, 165; *Birmingham News*, Aug. 12, 1963, 1.

23. Howell Raines, "Goodbye to the Bear," *New Republic*, 188 (Jan. 24, 1983), 11.

24. Racial politics in Alabama during the 1950's and 1960's are explored in Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). William Nunnally, *Bull Connor* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1990); and Frank Sikora, *Till Justice Comes Down* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1990) discuss the wave of Ku Klux Klan violence that terrorized Alabama in this period.

Champion,' is it? Hah! 'National' Champion of what? The Confederacy? This team hasn't poked its head above the Mason-Dixon Line since Appomattox." Murray suggested that Alabama might qualify for the "Front-of-the-Bus championship," because, like all Deep South universities, Alabama didn't want "any you-know-what in there cluttering up the color scheme." Murray also linked Bryant with the "savage ideal," a topical subject given that the day before Murray's column was published the FBI had arrested Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and twenty other white residents of Neshoba County, Mississippi, for the murders of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi. "Football recruiters in the South don't go out looking for Robert E. Lee types anymore. 'They go out and hunt till they find a boy kicking a sleeping dog,' an Atlanta newsman once confided to me. 'Him, they take.'" The unnamed Atlantan blamed the increasing violence of southern college football on Bear Bryant.<sup>25</sup>

Outraged southerners once again rallied to Bryant's defense. William Harrington of Lexington, Kentucky, wrote Bryant, "I think Jim Murray is full of b. s. I don't think the S.E.C. has to take a back seat to any d-m Yankee football or basketball team. Tell your players we Kentuckians are rooting for Alabama to give an old-fashioned country licking to Nebraska" (in the upcoming Orange Bowl). Harrington requested a picture of Bryant and the Alabama team as a perfect expression of southern pride. "I want some Yankees working around me to see a *real coach* and a *real football team*."<sup>26</sup> In a letter to the editor of *The Los Angeles Times* published in *The Wetumpka* (Alabama) *Herald*, Robert Milner denounced the attack on Alabama football as part of a larger pattern of anti-southern bias on the part of the national media.

As a usual matter, I do not have the time or inclination to answer the slanted news reports concerning this section of the country, but this is too much. The formula is well known—if something is unfavorable about the South, the news is splashed all over the front pages of newspapers across the country, but if the news is favorable to us, then we are either ridiculed in some way or the item is ignored or buried. I submit the article is unfair and unsportsmanlike, and is such an unjust criticism of a great football team (coached by one of the top football coaches of all time) that I feel compelled to reply.<sup>27</sup>

Vincent Johnson, the sports editor of *The Mobile Press-Register*, commented on the mounting frenzy there. "Alabama football fans, reacting like so many toros, are pawing the ground in helpless anger and snorting words of flaming hate in the direction of the Los Angeles torreador." Johnson dismissed "Murray's frothings" as an attempt to curry favor with a "reading audience in Los Angeles [that] is comprised of a large slice of the country's Negro population."<sup>28</sup> Benny Marshall of *The Birmingham News* passed Murray off as "a sort of a Mack the Knife, who never lets facts stand in the

25. *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 4, 1964, III-1.

26. William Harrington to Paul Bryant, Dec. 14, 1965, BMA, A-0002-05.

27. *Wetumpka Herald*, Dec. 31, 1964, clipping in HSC, Rose Papers, 121-84A6411-5.

28. *Mobile Press-Register*, Dec. 13, 1964, 2-D.

way of a good slashing.” He took note of the cultural gulf that divided Alabama and California, calling Los Angeles “the kook capital of the world.” A Birmingham television sports anchor elaborated on this theme, suggesting that Alabamians send Care Packages of razor blades, soap, and deodorant to Murray for distribution to his long-haired, unwashed fellow Californians.<sup>29</sup>

While Jim Murray became the *bête noir* of the moment, the editors of *The New York Times* had never been on the Christmas card lists of many Alabamians. The unflinching editorial support that the *Times* gave the civil rights movement outraged the sensibilities of the vast majority of white southerners. Alabamians particularly resented the *Times* for Harrison Salisbury’s 1961 article, “Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham.” Salisbury offered a brutally frank portrayal of the violence and racial animosity that poisoned the city, and he asserted that the level of repression there was comparable to that of Eastern Europe. *Times* reporter Calvin Trillin was stopped by Birmingham police for a minor traffic infraction while covering the 1963 civil disobedience campaign led by Martin Luther King, and was taken to jail after the policeman learned the identity of his employer. The Police Commissioner of Montgomery won a huge libel judgment against the *Times* in an Alabama court over minor factual errors in a 1961 advertisement denouncing the lack of police protection given to Freedom Riders by Montgomery city officials. The *Times* escaped Alabama justice when the Supreme Court absolved it of any legal culpability in the landmark *New York Times v. Sullivan* decision in 1964.<sup>30</sup>

The 1964 Alabama-Auburn game gave the editors of *The Birmingham News* what they considered absolute proof that the *Times* had once again gone too far. The *News* published an editorial entitled “We Had a Game, Too” declaring that the overt editorial bias of *The New York Times* against the state of Alabama had even crept into the sports section. The *News* claimed that the *Times* intentionally trivialized the Alabama-Auburn game by burying a brief account of the game on the last page of the sports section alongside a report on the NYU-Harvard fencing match. The *News* concluded, “Alabamians have felt slighted or mistreated at the hands of the good, grey *Times* before, and in connection with much more momentous matters, and have survived and prospered. Everybody but *The New York Times* knows where the 1965 football season really climaxed.”<sup>31</sup>

The only problem with this impassioned defense of Alabama football honor was that the *News* based its editorial on an early edition of the *Times*. The *Times* had indeed included a small article about the Alabama-Auburn

29. *Birmingham News*, Dec. 9, 1964, 63; Dec. 11, 1964, 20.

30. Harrison E. Salisbury, “Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1960, 1; Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 114-15, 229; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 295-96, 270-71; Anthony Lewis, *Make No Law: The Sullivan Case and the First Amendment* (New York: Random House, 1991).

31. *Birmingham News*, Dec. 2, 1965, 15.

game in its first edition, but six later editions contained a lengthy account on page one of the sports section. James Roach, the sports editor of the *Times*, complained in a letter sheepishly published by the *News* that the editorial “dedicated itself to the proposition that I was either an incompetent dimwit or an addlebrain with anti-Alabama prejudice.” Roach suggested that an apology would be in order and added, “I am astonished at your lack of knowledge of the mechanics of the newspaper business.”<sup>32</sup> The editors of the *News* took their football seriously indeed, and they gave voice to an opinion held by many white Alabamians, namely, that there was a Yankee conspiracy to rob Bryant and his teams of their due for political reasons.

The football conspiracy theorists could not complain about the 1965 wire service polls, which named Alabama national champions for the third time in five years, but the 1966 polls were another story. The defending national champion Crimson Tide was undefeated and untied in 1966, yet finished the season third in the nation behind Michigan State and Notre Dame, despite the controversial 10-10 tie between those teams in November of that year. The wanton police brutality of the Selma Voting Rights March and George Wallace’s evasion of the constitutional prohibition of gubernatorial succession by running his cancer-stricken wife Lurleen as a stand-in may have influenced even the ordinarily apolitical sportswriters and coaches who voted in the polls. Bud Collins of *The Boston Globe* believed this to be true. “It is unfashionable to say anything nice about Alabama and Coach Bear Bryant because they are segregationists,” declared Collins. “Nevertheless, they are winning them all in that cutthroat area where anything goes.” Collins believed that the University of Alabama deserved the national championship despite the horrible reputation the state had earned. “Poor Alabama. It has Selma to live down, as well as Lureen [sic] and George, and Sheriff Bull O’Connor’s [sic] police dogs. Surely there’s something worthwhile down there. Yes—it has the best football team.”<sup>33</sup>

Like Collins, suspicious southerners were also convinced that the football pollsters had made a political scapegoat out of the Crimson Tide. Bull Connor commiserated with Bryant in a letter written days after the release of the final 1966 football polls. “Thousands of others in this State and country know that Alabama is Number 1,” asserted Connor. “Any team that has not been beat [sic] should be No. 1. What the heck do you have to do to be No. 1?”<sup>34</sup> J. N. Lipscomb, a University of Mississippi trustee, wrote Bryant that he was “hotter than a six shooter about the way the boys of superior complex ignored Alabama’s great football team in the number one placement honors.” He was outraged by this transparent Yankee plot to deny Bryant and his team their due, grumbling, “Some great Americans seem to think that any thing coming out of the South is inferior, unless it bears the stamp (and color) of

32. *Birmingham News*, Dec. 15, 1965, 14.

33. *Boston Globe*, Nov. 22, 1966, 43.

34. Eugene Connor to Paul Bryant, Dec. 6, 1966, BMA, A-0009-22.

Martin Luther [King] and a few of our white Pulitzer Prize winners.” He was certain that Alabama would defend the honor of the southland in the Sugar Bowl against Nebraska, and assured Bryant that the Southeastern Conference rivalry between Alabama and Ole Miss would not prevent the Mississippi trustees from rooting for Alabama. While he would not be able to attend the game, Lipscomb promised to “chain my bird dog to her bed, lay down my automatic, and glue my vindictive eyes to the television set. In the words of Light Horse Harry Truman, GIVE ’EM HELL.”<sup>35</sup>

A fire-eating self-parody like Lipscomb could be ordered up from central casting as the caricature of an unreconstructed southerner who is just itching to lead a charge against some damn Yankees. Yet John Shelton Reed and others have demonstrated that, while a defensive and often xenophobic sectionalism has long existed in the region, this impulse has coexisted with a powerful strain of intense nationalism. Southerners in general have since the antebellum era had the desire to be both loyal southerners and patriotic Americans. These often contradictory impulses are evident in varying responses of southerners to outside criticism of Bryant and his teams. While some reacted with bitter defensiveness, most were genuinely hurt that the rest of the nation failed to perceive Bryant and his team as symbols of the patriotism, work ethic, and general decency of southerners. This desire to defend the basic moral goodness of the South, what Fred Hobson calls “the southern rage to explain,” is a common thread uniting twentieth-century progressives, postbellum New South boosters, antebellum proslavery theologians, and generations of southern writers.<sup>36</sup>

Alma Christine Todd, an Alabama native living in Papillion, Nebraska, wrote an anguished letter of protest to University of Nebraska Coach Bob Devaney after he told an off-color joke about Bryant and Joe Namath at a high-school football banquet. She scolded Devaney for his sectional prejudice: “When we hear leading citizens giving this type of degrading view to the leaders of tomorrow we have no need to wonder why we as adults have to take so much abuse concerning our background. Please Mr. DeVaney [sic], we are good people. We love this country but why is it necessary to degrade us as you do?”<sup>37</sup>

Todd sent a copy of this letter to Bryant along with a personal note expressing her anguish over the demonization of the South. Devaney’s jibe had been bad enough, she informed Bryant, but that very morning her own minister had harshly condemned southern whites for their racial bigotry. His sermon specifically singled out Alabama as the most despicable spot in this benighted region. “You’d think the South was another continent the way we are dissected [sic] from the United States and condemned by its leaders,” she

35. J. N. Lipscomb to Paul Bryant, Dec. 17, 1966, BMA, A-0010-15.

36. Fred Hobson asserts, “The radical need of the Southerner to explain and interpret the South is an old and prevalent condition,” in *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983), 3.

37. Alma Christine Todd to Bob Devaney, April 26, 1965, BMA, A-0003-03.

lamented.<sup>38</sup> That Todd would send such a heartfelt confessional letter to Paul Bryant is indicative of his iconic status among white southerners. Bryant successfully mediated the conflict between ideals of unhesitating nationalism and sectional loyalty. He also projected the image of the patriarchal figure who possessed the power to defend the honor of a persecuted but virtuous people. The slogan of Lurleen Wallace's 1966 gubernatorial campaign was "Stand Up for Alabama," and in the most memorable line of her inaugural address she declared, "I am proud to be an Alabamian." These words possessed a defiant emptiness that Alabamians knew all too well. George Wallace made a lot of noise, but he invariably lost his quixotic battles. Alabamians who have been given so few reasons to feel pride in their native state saw Paul Bryant as a warrior who turned those mere slogans into tangible reality on the gridiron.<sup>39</sup>

George Wallace thrived on abuse by outsiders, but Paul Bryant realized that Alabama's status as national pariah was diminishing the stature of his football program. A hard line on racial matters and condemnation of the "pointy-headed intellectuals" of the national liberal elite who needed a "barbed wire enema" was good politics for the governor, but the coach was far better served by a moderate stance. In December 1966 Bryant attempted a bit of damage control. "A few years ago, we had segregation problems. But now, we'd like to ask the help of you fellows up above us in the North, who have been our critics, to help us get games with the Big Ten, the Big Eight, the Pacific Coast." Jim Murray howled in delight at Bryant's proffered olive branch. "Dust off the courthouse at Appomattox! Get ready for a new era of Reconstruction! Bear Bryant and the sovereign state of Alabama have handed over their swords!"<sup>40</sup>

Murray's sarcasm contained a nugget of truth. Alabama's 1966 and 1967 bowl games against the integrated University of Nebraska team were a significant racial milestone in Alabama. Moderate Alabamians breathed a collective sigh of relief when both games passed without a replay of the Holt-Graning incident with racial overtones in front of a national television audience. In fact, Bryant's players displayed an exaggerated form of southern chivalry while administering a 34-7 drubbing to the Cornhuskers in the 1967 Sugar Bowl, repeatedly helping Nebraska players to their feet after knocking them down. While Nebraska players complained after the game that they regarded this unwanted assistance as condescension, the press and public gushed over this wonderful display of good sportsmanship.<sup>41</sup> The many Americans conditioned to view white southerners as congenitally violent thugs were probably mildly surprised that the Alabama players did not commit unspeakable mayhem against the black Nebraska players, while moder-

38. Alma Christine Todd to Paul Bryant, April 26, 1965, BMA, A-0003-03.

39. For a discussion of George Wallace's exploitation of Alabamians' intense need to feel pride in their state, see Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, esp. ch. 9.

40. *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 6, 1966, III-1.

41. *Birmingham News*, Jan. 3, 1967, 14.

ate southerners were pleased by this show of intersectional amity. The Alabama business leaders who desperately wanted an end to the racial violence and confrontations were especially grateful that nothing happened to damage further the reputation of the state. Winton Blount, a millionaire Montgomery businessman and close associate of Bryant's who later served in the Nixon Cabinet, was a leading figure in the effort to reach a racial accommodation that would facilitate economic growth. Blount was pleased that Bryant and his team had generated a rare bit of favorable publicity for Alabama. "The sportsmanship that everybody exhibited was so marked and with 40 million people watching I don't know how we could have done anything more effective in this area which so badly needs help," he wrote Bryant.<sup>42</sup>

Bryant never sought the role of defender of white supremacy or martyr to the cause of southern rights. He was accorded that status by white southerners eager for a symbol of victory and perseverance amid the recurrent failures of massive resistance. Bryant, unlike George Wallace, achieved his status without employing the inflammatory racist rhetoric that during the 1960's was the sine qua non of the white southern leadership. When the stunningly rapid shift of the southern racial paradigm occurred in the late 1960's and early 1970's, Bryant was thus perfectly positioned to make the transition. He was highly successful in recruiting black athletes during the 1970's, and his racially integrated Alabama teams won an unprecedented eight Southeastern Conference championships and three national titles during that decade. In a demonstration of the extraordinary adaptability of the cultural text of southern college football, Bryant and his biracial teams quickly became a symbol of the new paradigm of racial harmony and cooperation. Southerners eager to construct a usable past compatible with their newly desegregated society embraced Bryant as a hero who embodied the proud traditions of the southern past without possessing the taint of racial bigotry. In a similarly abrupt reversal, the national media, which had demonized Bryant for representing the worst of the southern tradition, by the mid-1970's portrayed him as an authentic American folk hero. *Time*, which had condemned him as beyond the pale of civilized society in 1961, gave him the ultimate popular cultural encomium in 1980, when his avuncular visage adorned its cover and a laudatory feature article sang his praises. The dramatic alteration of Bryant's image at both national and sectional levels reflected the societal need for heroes who embody dominant cultural values.

42. Winton Blount to Paul Bryant, Jan. 5, 1967, BMA, A-0009-09. The moderating influence of the southern business leaders who worked to end legal segregation is discussed in Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).