

4-1-2015

Q&A: Nick Theodore '52

Brendan Tapley
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Tapley, Brendan (2015) "Q&A: Nick Theodore '52," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 58 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol58/iss1/15>

This Regular Feature is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.



Y

You began your career in the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1963 at age 34. Do you remember what got you into politics?

N.T.: I come from a Greek background, a Hellenic background, and that always comes with an interest in government.

Was the political climate then different from now?

N.T.: When I ran for the House, the attitude of the people and the elected officials was very genuine. For instance, I had no idea the position had a financial compensation. Nothing compared to what they are receiving today, something like a few thousand dollars a year, but that never entered my mind and I don't think it did for others. We found ourselves in a more civic-responsibility position.

Do you think there is something in a politician's psyche that prefers power over service?

N.T.: I'm always reluctant to say it's not as good as it used to be, but when you look at where South Carolina was when I was in office: We were a poor state. We're not wealthy today, but economically speaking we're much better than we were. I think being in a less attractive economic condition and needing so much reform...it's unfortunately true that, in politics or personal living, sometimes when you're too comfortable, complacency has a tendency to

Nick Theodore '52

Former South Carolina state representative, senator, and lieutenant governor, and author of the recent memoir Trials and Triumphs: South Carolina's Evolution 1962-2014

BY BRENDAN TAPLEY



arrive...and abuses, as we have seen in recent years.

You served two terms as a Democratic lieutenant governor under Republican Carroll Campbell. What was the trick to working together?

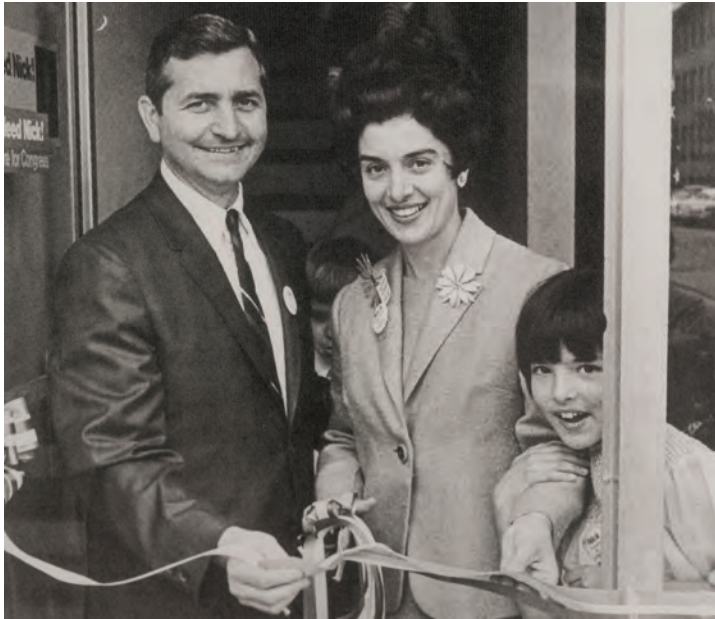
N.T.: Well, we both were from Greenville County and I understood the jurisdictions of the office. He was the chief executive of the state and I was there to supplement. It didn't mean I had to agree with all his positions. He and I were willing to cross [party] lines. We could not afford to let partisan politics enter into our objectives and the results we wanted for our people.

But if, as you say, a leader gets so much done when crossing party lines, why don't politicians do it more today?

N.T.: I'm not sure I have an answer for that except for the fact that the parties sometimes have a tendency to be overbearing on their elected officials to join their line and not cross it. [Former Governor] Bob McNair said that government in South Carolina would not benefit from the two-party system if it promoted discord and dissension. I've never thought partisan politics should enter state politics because you're so close to the bodies you're representing.

You write in your book that you were asked to change parties before your 1994 gubernatorial campaign. Why didn't you?

N.T.: It crossed my mind before I was asked. When a member of the Republican party's leadership came to see me, I could not disagree with anything he said—that by making this change I would be in a position to be elected governor, and I would certainly be in a better



UP AND COMING

Nick Theodore with his family at the start of his political career in South Carolina.

position to raise financial resources for the campaign. However, in the final analysis, I would still have been the same Nick Theodore serving with the same ideas, and so the only reason for [the switch] would have been selfish.

When you look at the Democrat and Republican parties over your career, do you think they've changed?

N.T.: I think they have changed a great deal. I think about people like Tip O'Neill and Newt Gingrich, and how Clinton brought together different people. Unless we can break down some of these barriers, we are not going to get the greatest good for the greatest number.

Some people would say that it's hard to make good choices if we don't have the best people running.

N.T.: Better candidates must be assured that the electorate

is going to give them a fair shot and not have partisan politics be the ultimate rule the voters depend on.

So, are we getting the politicians we deserve?

N.T.: We live in the greatest free country in the history of the world and we should take that responsibility as a citizen very seriously. It's obvious it should not be a half-hearted vote. It should be a vote that analyzes the candidate, not one that follows a team or party. [Candidates] should all be placed on an evaluating scale and their pasts, present, and potential should be looked at. Too often, voters do "blind voting," where they vote straight tickets.

If you could pass one reform by fiat, what would it be?

N.T.: I would probably want to develop a bona fide system of term limitations. In political, corporate, or any phase of life,



NEXT

Reflection on the Importance of Furman Going Forward

Historians spend their time looking back at the past, not forward into the future. Yet a recent, ongoing project of mine has pushed me to see opportunities for our *alma mater's* future in Furman's past.

For the last year, I have been the co-chair of a committee on campus that has planned a commemoration of desegregation at Furman. This milestone historical event—**Joseph Allen Vaughn's** enrollment as our first black student—occurred 50 years ago in January 1965. The story of desegregation at Furman in the 1950s and 60s contains some uplifting elements and instances of Furman folks showing courage and a passion for justice. Conversely, it is not a proud episode for the university's leadership overall. Furman as an institution stood firmly within the wider culture of the white South that valued segregation and white supremacy. Vaughn's admission was more a result of federal pressure from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than a commitment to racial justice by the university.

My hope is that Furman's yearlong commemoration might serve as a springboard for a comprehensive examination of

racial issues on campus. Most of all, I hope that a study on race and diversity at Furman today will produce concrete programs and changes tomorrow that would make Furman a clearer reflection of our community and state in terms of race and social class. After all, insight into past injustice compels us to confront the legacies of those injustices.

Furman is due credit as an institution willing to look unblinkingly at its past. I think the real measure of our efforts as a university, however, will be whether a better understanding of our institution's past might be used constructively to address issues that still haunt us from the earlier period.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Steve O'Neill '82 is a professor in Furman's history department. He is a native of Charleston and received his PhD from the University of Virginia. He studies the history of the South and, in particular, the Civil Rights movement in South Carolina. He is also interested in public memory, which is how ordinary people—non-scholars—make sense of the past.



“It’s unfortunately true that, in politics or personal living, sometimes when you’re too comfortable, complacency has a tendency to arrive.”

power has a tendency—when allowed to stay in office—to become too self-promoting.

What about nationally—what do you think is the most critical issue?

N.T.: Strict partisanship. If it’s proposed by one person or one party, then basically it is going to be opposed by the other parties. Whether it’s health care or labor relations or social circumstances, no one person and no one party is always right.

A lot of states have certain political reputations: Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio. How would you describe South Carolina’s?

N.T.: I think it has been on a rollercoaster. We’ve had a lost trust problem: 17 individuals prosecuted and only one acquitted for bribery, a state treasurer who resigned from office because of possession and distribution of drugs. A lieutenant governor who resigned shortly after taking office for ethics violations; the commissioner of agriculture,

who was placed in a penitentiary for, of all things, the promotion of cockfighting. And in spite of our progress in some areas, I learn too often how low our lawmakers hold priorities for children. In a report by the National Center on Child Homelessness that ranks states in child homelessness, South Carolina is 36th.

Do you have a political role model?

N.T.: Dick Riley ’54 would be a person who understands government better than anyone else I’ve served with. On the international level, I’ve always admired FDR and Winston Churchill.

What was your proudest political moment?

N.T.: Having proposed and passed the Education Finance

Act. And some of my rulings in the Senate, which turned around the so-called “bobtail” appropriation of funds—commingling funds, skirting the law by pushing funds into different areas—which were unconstitutional in my judgment.

A journalist recently described you as someone who “took his wins with humility and his losses with dignity.” That said a lot about you but it might also say a lot about what is missing today.

N.T.: I certainly appreciated that. The constituency in our state and nation deserves impartial and unselfish representation. We must continue to strive for that ultimate goal that recognizes the government of the self-governed is the finest work of the government. **F**

From the Vault



May Days

What you may not have known, remembered, or thought possible at Furman

BY JULIA COWART

May Day celebrations and crowning a May queen began in Greenville

as early as 1834 with the Greenville Female Academy. May Day traditions continued after the academy closed in 1854 and the South Carolina Baptist Convention chartered the Greenville Baptist Female College (later Greenville Woman’s College [GWC]). May Day celebrations at GWC in the 20th century were often based on a theme and often included a play. The earliest photograph Furman has of a May Day queen at GWC is from 1919. The one at left is from the 1930s.

The May queen was elected by female students on the basis of popularity and leadership, in addition to beauty. After the merger with Furman in 1938, male students were also allowed to vote for the May queen. The May Day celebrations stopped in the 1960s.