

Monologue with George S. Mitchell
“Face of the South”

Date:

M: I am George Mitchell. I live in Atlanta. I used to work for the Southern Regional Council. It's known for establish[ing] race relations that runs back thirty-five years. About half our members are white, about half are Negro. [It's made of] preachers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, business, labor, _____, and church people. Over the years, I have been asked many times to explain this out, and in just a few minutes [I will]. This is a map of the southeastern states. The green _____ are where the _____. We began the settlement of that map in two main places, _____ Chesapeake Bay and _____ to Charleston Harbor. In both those places you could get sailing ships deep into the plantations and take off the crops. In both places, though no one intended it, it wasn't long before the land came to be held in big chunks, two, five, ten, twenty thousand acres. That gave the English people owning big pieces of good land, workable transportation, rich markets, [but] no labor. So they sent _____ to the British Isles for labor to work their places. White labor that came in under a _____ of contract of service to pay for its profit. The contracts all ended with the same clause: And when the said **William Jackson** shall have served his seven years, he shall be set free with an ax and a pair of blue britches and **twenty cents**. But he came to this country for land and _____. He worked thirty years on some man's plantation, and that's what you got. Well obviously you're going out in the empty woods and make a farm for yourself.

Because all of the white labor that they brought in did that is the real reason why plantation owners here and here sees [a need for] Negro slave labor, which they could hold and control. As long as we were attached to the British crown, freedom grew much more rapidly than slavery. [There were] other people pushing off the plantations, many more free people coming down the **Shandano** opening all this. And slavery grew hardly at all. Patch in here, **wish** down there, Mobile, New Orleans, Nashville. The people who framed the Constitution of the United States weren't worried about slavery, [they] thought it would die an early and easy death. Even [in] 1787, Thomas Jefferson introduced a measure into the Virginia legislature to abolish slavery, and it failed passage by only one vote. We were that close to it. And _____ after that is 1800, wild horses couldn't have pulled slavery loose from us. The thing that made the difference was the cotton gin, which opened the whole of that rich coastal plain to the slave crop, and see how in sixty years slavery and cotton spread. It started here, up, down, across, _____, back into Florida, up the river, out over the delta, up the _____, _____, Little Basin, Blue Grass, and started all over again in the black _____ and the coastal plain of Texas. In sixty years, slavery conquered all of that, and wherever it went, it took two from the _____ institutions. Land [was] owned in big chunks and worked by slave labor. Also wherever it went, most of these little people got out ahead of it. _____, some into the sandy country, others into the Nole hills, more into the mountains, Ohio, Indiana, _____, Texas, [and] Oklahoma. This piece with the red lines around it is the whole of the storybook [of the] old South. All of the white column mansions with the

magnolia trees in front, big fields with cotton, fancy houses, [and] worse, all the colleges, all the schools, all the newspapers, all the banks, all the governors, all the senators, all the political power. Before 1865, if it wasn't inside those red lines, almost certainly it was poor, unemployed, [and] pushed aside. And there were a good many people outside those red lines multiplying fast, and they complained, [but] there wasn't much they could do about it. One man wrote a book. He was a non-slave holding white man. [He] published his book in a ominous year, 1858, and gave it an ominous title, The Impending Crisis at the South. He said in his book that the South in his day was a pyramid. [There was] six million poor white people on one side, four million poor black people on the other, and 350,000 slave holders on top. He said, that's not going to last, that'll blow up, and in only seven years it had blown up. [There was] war, defeat, _____, fire, a complete inflation that took every farmer's property value except title deeds to land. Oh, the top blown off in the United States government sitting at the top of _____, and this and this put their hands together and tried to run it. All the books say they came because they were dishonest. I think they failed because they were poor, inexperienced, uneducated. Certainly they failed, when all of that time we had in the south a precious luxury resource which no one was using. _____ notions come upon warm, wet winds. As when a warm wet wind hits a rolling mountain, it turns into rivers, [and] the rivers run to the sea. We had already labor multiplying in abundance on small farms. There was cotton all around you, and the rivers gave you power. Beginning about 1880, and working hard at it ever since, we have been fitting together in that middle ground between the mountains

and the plantation a whole new piece for the South, and the books call that the piedmont South. If you look at that map closely you'll see that it divides the South not only into three main pieces, but really into four, because here around the outside there's still another piece which is called the **coastal flatwoods**, or the **pioneer woods**. That gives you four different Souths: the mountains in the middle, the piedmont next, the plantations next, and the pioneer woods at the outside. Each is different, each has a different history, [a] different set of people, [and a] different set of problems. If we were to make them equal in a democratic South, there's different things to be done in each one of those pieces.

Start in the mountains and _____ a man from up in eastern Kentucky said he could lay it out for me for the plain. Draw yourself a line in mountain valley, put a stream down the middle of it, _____ mountain up on this side, we'll scream a mountain on this. In 1794, he said, they came up in there and did not count on an old farmer named **Will Judas**, [who] took himself up a nice bottom pond down at the mouth of the valley [and] built him a log cabin right by the creek. Old Man Willie'd been there four times; however, he left North Carolina and he brought sixteen hand of _____ up into Kentucky women, and he was married two more times in Kentucky. So you can understand how many beard old man Will that made thirty-eight problems for the _____ that they had to cut back up into that valley. Well it wasn't long before there wasn't anymore flat land for anybody, but the young people [were] still coming on. One fellow went to his dad and said, Pop, me and **Jezebel** fixing to _____, but there's no

flat land for us. We thought if we'd go up to that hollow great mountain and skin off all the oak trees, we might could make a living. Well they did, and the end of that is that by 1890, other young fellows and other **Jezebel's** had gone to cling to the top of both mountains. _____ skin off all the trees, and people in these bottom _____ every time it rains. It all seems to come scooping down the creek beds passing what it had before. Well pretty soon that's floods, and the floods ruin the crops. That gives your people living down in the hills _____ causing farmers, and they're hungry. Well I asked the Kentucky man what you could do about that. Oh, he says, that stuffs a _____. Send somebody in there that really understands about good farming, let him live at least a year [to] get to know the people, as far as he can persuade them to swap land so that each man has for his farm both a nice piece of bottom land a long piece of hill land. Of course some of them won't swap, but then most of them will. Then you get everybody that has swapped to work his land on what's called a farm plan. Put a cow in your pasture that's for milk, take half your _____ to the mill for meal, feed the rest to the hogs, and now you all living in a sweet _____ fit of Kentucky and got milk, and meal, and meat. But he said, even if you do that you get one more thing you want to do, you want to come in there _____. [He said, you want to] build a very large one of these vocational trade schools, because all those people up in there are still having trouble, and if those children come through that school, and when they get to Detroit they can light on their feet. That slow business, valley by valley, begins to be done. Other things to do in the mountains [were to] let the mills climb the mountains and make more

factory jobs, more forest care, more tourist trade. If you did all those things you'd have a prosperous and democratic mountain society.

Come down from the mountains and take the piedmont piece. Except for our seaport cities, most of the thriving cities in the southeastern states today are somewhere inside that piedmont country. Remember those small squares? [They're] still there. The basic pattern of farming in all this piedmont country is the family owned farm. And wonder of wonders, none of those medium sized farms today is more than twelve or fifteen miles away from a factory. That's pretty good. That's a balance between industry and agriculture. Further, the people in that area have two very nice things to have: a firm grasp for political democracy so strong that in the last fifteen years it has grown to include some negro voters and all of those piedmont cities, [and] secondly, a beginning grasp of economic democracy through trade unions and through a special kind of union they've worked out for themselves which they call mixed unions, with white people and colored people both in them. I looked at one of those unions when it was brand new. [It] had 1,000 members, 500 white [and] 500 negro. The secretary/treasurer of the local [union] took me to his home back up behind one of the suburbs, a neat white painted house on a hill [with] twenty other white people's houses like it up there. [I] stood on his porch and looked down in the valley and there was huddle of tar paper black shacks. I said, who lives in the bottom? [He said], they're color. [Do] they work in the shop? [He said], yes, they work in the shop. [Do they] belong to this union? [He said], yes, they're members. Then he said, Mr. Mitchell, can you see a little path running back and forth

between up there where we live and down there where they live? Well sure enough, you could see it kind of faint, [so] I said yes. He said, before this union came there wasn't any path at all. Well I said right then that a population which has a basically democratic pattern of land ownership, is scattered and decentralized and has a prosperous industrial economy, a firm grasp for political democracy, and a beginning grasp of economic democracy, and in both fields is learning to overleap the barriers of race, is in pretty fair shape.

[Now] skip the plantation one and take the outside piece, the pioneer woods. Except for its rich port cities, except an occasional patch of land in some specialty crop, in the whole of that outside piece of country there are only four things: sand, _____, pine trees, and poor folks. [There are only] two things to do, save the pine trees [and] spread the money from the pine trees to the poor folks. Well saving the pine trees we know how to do. [As for] spreading the money out, you're lucky, it's been looked after for you in the last ten years. They used to get fifteen and twenty cents an hour, had no minimum wage, [and] had no wisp of the union. Now they wouldn't think of working for less than \$1.17, they have a scheduled minimum wage, and they're fast joining the chemical workers, the paper workers, and the wood workers. So I suppose they _____.

That shirks us up to the old plantation belt, and that's always the hardest one to unravel.

Call anyone down there you want, draw yourself a line and country road, this side will be the old **Judge Atkin's** place, the judge put together 3,700 acres before he died, [then you have] another big place here, [and] another big place here. Then on this side of the road [the owner] had him a lot of land but he got broke about ten years ago and sold the land on the front of the road and made five small farms. There were three white farmers [that] took up there and two colored. [Then you've got] another big gate here [and] another big gate here. Behind each one of these big houses there is other woods. Now let's be honest, this is really the way it was fifteen or eighteen years ago, and it's changed a lot since, but the shadow of what was there is there. Either _____ little black sharecrop shack and bosses big new barn here and they'll work the whole place together. As the man had his land divided up into little twenty-five/thirty acre tenant farms, little old house and a piece of barn on each farm, it didn't make much difference which way it was. People [will] always be living in these big houses don't live in them anymore. [They] live in town, belong to the city clubs, [and] have automobiles. But they've got some white fellows, probably the wife's brother, [who] drinks a lot and charges it to the place. People in the big houses has got money or can get it if they need it. People in the little houses usually [are] poor. People in the big houses [are] all white. People in the little houses [are] mostly colored. People in the big houses get their sons and daughters through the state university. People in the little houses get their children through about the fourth grade and they quit. People in the little houses depend on the people in the big houses for some very important things: land, house, job, what to do, safety, good name, justice. Suppose I

went down to the county and called a meeting of the people out of the big houses and I met with the luncheon club and the county seat **teller**. [I] tell them that my name is George Mitchell, I live in Atlanta, and I work for the Southern Regional Council. We believe in what they call civil rights, and I'm going to explain to you exactly what that means in this county. In the first place it means you're going to have to allow these colored people to vote, [but] not all of them. [In the] second place it means they [can] serve on jury, grand jury and petty jury. In the third place it means that the schools are paid for out of the public purse. Any child in the neighborhood, colored or white, must be allowed to go to the best school the place has got. The last thing that it is, if a colored man in the county buys a railroad ticket, nobody can make him ride in the Jim Crow coaches. That's what they call civil rights and I'm in favor of that. I came to ask you gentleman to help us get that rolling in the county, now what do you say? Well Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, we've been happy to have had you at luncheon with us. We had heard about that civil rights and we don't think much of it. You've been frank with us and we're going to be frank with you, and the first thing we're going to tell you is that you don't understand the situation in this county. You see Mr. Mitchell, the colored people here have had about fourth grade education, and we're not saying it's their fault, they went to the schools and worked their farming, but if that's all they know [then] it's too soon to allow them to vote. And about that serving on the jury, Mr. Mitchell, our present county judge is quite unlikely to permit that in his courtroom. About schools, I'll tell you the truth, it's hard enough to get the people in this county to vote money even for their

white schools. If two sets of children are going to be put together in the same school, it will just be a very difficult lot to get up the local tax money. About the railroad train, well we don't have the railroad in the county so that question doesn't come up. But while we don't have the railroad line, we also ride the bus line. There's a bus coming through here at half past two. I have my car here [and] I'd be glad to take you down to the bus station [because] we want to be sure you get safely on the way you came from. So what can you do about it? That one's really the tough one. I showed you these four farms here. Nobody helped these people, they didn't get any government loans, they just worked hard, saved their money, [and] bought land, free American private enterprise. By now some of these little fellows who had a lot of land on a one year unwritten lease had persuaded their land lord to give them papers for five years on a farm for themselves. He has no say because he's got a five year written lease on his place. There's a little left of a federal agency called the **Farmer's Home Administration**. In a _____ tendency county like that it's supposed to lend enough money for four or five carefully chosen tenants to buy farms and fix them up for themselves. _____, he said, when four or five of those tenants get their loans, they will pull their money and buy one of the big places and split it there. [They would] not [buy] little farms, now, [but] good big ones, 180, 220, even 300 acres. [They had] good barns, good stock, good people. [They] weren't all that way, four or five years. A white man come down that road from up around the courthouse and called a meeting of the white farmers. Well as you all know me, some of us at the courthouse were sitting around the other day talking about the primary [that's] going to be in a little

more than six months. [There is] still time to register. We figured up if we could get about 238 more votes, we can throw out the fellow in the legislature from this county. Now he's no good, and what time he's sober up there, he is going to give us what we want. I came down here to see how many people you've got to throw him out. Now how many have you got? Well, they say, on this place there are not just the four white farmers. That'll be fourteen votes, you'll get them all, is that enough? No, he'll say, I was hoping I could get some more. Well, they say, we've told you all the white people we've got. [Then a] man on the back row get his hand [up] kind of tentatively like [and] says, how about the colored ones, [will you] take that? Somebody else said, hold on there, colored men aren't allowed to vote in this county. The man on the back row said, of course I know that's so, they have not [the right to vote]. But then these colored people right in down here are kind of different. They've got their own places, they have good homes, [and] they've been coming over here and helping us with our work and we didn't even have to ask them too. I know if they were to vote they'd vote with us, so I say let's get them to vote, what ya'll say about that? They said, let's get them to vote. The point being is that soon they got basically equal. Then their civil rights came walking down the country dirt road. That's hard lives, but we've got something we need to do in the whole of that old plantation belt. Not sporadically, not quickly. I certainly don't think that [we need to take] \$3 billion worth of government bonds [and] buy everybody's big place and give it to all the poor people in the county. That doesn't work. But I do say we've had a consistent public policy stretching over many years, putting in that old plantation belt as

many islands of independent family farming as we can. Other things to do in there [are to] bring the high tension power lines down into that country. A million more people are going to leave there in the next ten years hunting jobs. Why can't jobs come to them? [We need to] change their schooling system too. They're hoe hands today and will be mill hands tomorrow, teach them industrial skills. Well if you did that you'd have the fourth and last one fixed up, and by definition we've got an equal and democratic center. Now a queer thing, in all of that I've said nothing about states, and yet we live in states and states are important. Let's get in the state lines and see what they mean. Take South Carolina: the mountains just graze the backs of two counties, the piedmont piece is narrow and sharp, [and] the plantation piece is wide and long. Suppose you got everybody up in here to join a union, or some real farmer's organization, and they passed for a law they would like to get through the legislature, and their law will not pass because there's so many more state senators from down here than from up here. Georgia's the same way. [It has] little piece of mountains, little piece of piedmont, [and a] big piece of plantation. Nothing changes. It's far worse than it looks on this map because this old plantation belt has been drained of people for forty years. With exceptions that don't matter, it has never been drained of a seat in the state legislature yet. So their suggesting the biggest on the map has added an artificial political power, the consequence of which is that across the states of the lower South we are all held, in every public and most private acts, to the attitudes and practices acceptable to that politically predominant part of the state least advanced in democratic arrangements. For contrast,

take North Carolina. [It has] a big piece of mountains, the largest piece of piedmonts, two shrinking **lemons** of plantation country. [It is] a state that did lead us for sixty-five years. Now at the end we come back to civil rights. The material basis for change is here. We've got school buildings, we've got hospitals, and they and the doctors are bringing us public health, farm land tenure is better, and poor man's houses are twice as good as they were fifteen years ago. War and business skill have brought us billions of dollars in new factories. These things are jobs and farms and homes and schools and health. That's just the other side of the nickel, the civil rights. It's a change from past tradition. We were a plantation society so long, but now we are an industrial society. It is a case where history has caught up with us and we have to bring our ideas around to the new way we make our living. When you go into a _____ economy, unique, you no longer want your work people ignorant, fearful, divided, and voteless, you want them educated, organized, friendly, and full citizens. It is a change, and we love tradition, but we are called upon to make it. We are a religious people, and a responsible people, and I believe we can achieve what the age demands.