

All Alone With His Courage

A Dixie Mayor and Rights

By Walter Rugaber
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ATLANTA.

For days the word went out from the big business men and civic leaders, the political pros and public opinion molders, the people in Atlanta who usually count the most.

"You're making a big mistake."

The message was plain, blunt and nearly unanimous. Ivan Allen Jr., the 52-year-old merchant-turned-Mayor, listened very carefully.

Then, all alone with his courage, he flew off to Washington and went before the Senate Commerce Committee to read a carefully drafted 14-page statement.

"Gentlemen," the Mayor said firmly, "If I had your problem, armed with the local experience I have had, I would pass a public accommodations law."

Mr. Allen thus became the first—and just possibly the last—Southern politician to voice public approval of the most controversial portion of the civil rights bill.

The Mayor followed an outraged squadron of Southern political leaders, including Gov. Ross R. Barnett of Mississippi and Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama. The air was heavy with denunciation.

Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a member of the Senate committee, seemed hardly able to believe his ears at the Mayor's stand. A lot of the home folks had the same reaction.

"I wish to nominate you," one man wrote, "as Mr. Mau Mau of 1963. . . . I understood that you are a half-brother of Martin Luther King and that may explain your position."

It came as somewhat of a surprise that at least those who wrote the Mayor supported his stand about 2 to 1 in initial stages of the reaction last week.

"Deeply proud of you," a telegram said.

But few believed the majority to be on Mr. Allen's side.

The state and city chambers of commerce had moved in the opposite direction, and a canny political observer said:

"He has taken a very perilous step. I seriously doubt he can make it stick in the political forum—particularly if these things are still unsolved."

Mr. Allen, with strong Negro support, took office in January, 1962, after a harsh battle with arch-segregationist Lester Maddox. The Mayor drew 64 per cent of the vote.

He went in as a son of the city's old-line business community. While with his

father's multi-million dollar office supply firm he became president of both the city and state chambers of commerce.

But now the board room boys are a little on edge. None of that "Mau Mau" stuff, of course. While the Mayor's political life may be damaged, his personal stature is adjudged secure.

"It took a lot of courage to do what he did," one acquaintance said with a touch of awe, "and if that's his personal view—hell, I respect him for it."

Sure, the friend continued, segregation is wrong. But a Federal law against is something else. This was the crux of the worry: Mr. Allen had "deserted private enterprise."

The prominent owner of several cafeterias in town sent the Mayor a long, stinging telegram expressing shock and disappointment, then placed blown-up copies in his windows.

But in perfect illustration of the temper of things, the man's eating places were being picketed at the same time by whites whose signs branded him a "leader for integration."

The cafeteria owner had desegregated most of his chain last June. His concern was not civil rights, he insisted, but the preservation of free enterprise.

The Mayor came back to Atlanta and found two main schools of thought about his startling behavior before the Commerce Committee.

The least substantial version put it down as a shallow bid for Negro votes. But seasoned observers said that even with a full turnout he would still need plenty of whites.

For a quarter-century winning Atlanta politics has been based on a highly successful "alliance" between Negroes and the so-called "better-class" whites.

And the thought was that the latter might prefer free enterprise over Mr. Allen when the 1966 term comes up. The Mayor has indicated that he now intends to run again.

The second feeling about the Mayor's testimony considered the possibility that he had talked with President

Kennedy and was angling for a Federal job.

Mr. Allen denied it stoutly, insisting that he talked with no one in Washington except the committee official who invited him to appear.

He later received a short letter from the President which praised "a number of effective points" in the statement. Mayor Allen seemed genuinely surprised by it.

About his testimony he says simply that the nation's Mayors have been stuck out on a limb and left there to handle the whole racial crisis by themselves.

The Supreme Court has been striking down segregation laws for years, he points out, and yet no really solid legislation has taken their place.

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