

LeRoy Collins and the making of modern Florida

By Rick Edmonds, special to the Tampa Bay Times

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It has been more than 50 years now since LeRoy Collins served as Florida governor, and more than 20 since his death. But Collins' legacy for his beloved state and those engaging its policy and political challenges remains as fresh as ever. During the economic and political doldrums of this decade, his example is ripe for rediscovery.

Collins left an exemplary profile in courage, to use a phrase current in his day, in keeping the peace in Florida as his fellow white citizens gradually accepted what he had correctly concluded was both right and inevitable — the demise of separate public institutions for blacks and whites.

And he changed himself. "Born and raised here in Tallahassee, I was accustomed early to a segregated society," Collins told a Florida A&M University audience in 1981 at the 25th anniversary commemoration of the Tallahassee bus boycott.

During the 1950s, Collins continued, "I made some statements that tended to align me with the conditions and majority thinking of my time." But by the end of his 1968 campaign for the U.S. Senate, he was telling voters "that any rational man who looked at the horizon and saw the South of the future segregated was simply seeing a mirage."

Like Lincoln (both lacked much formal education) Collins cultivated eloquence — a mastery of rhetoric, a repertoire that included literary references, historical allusions and amusing country stories. "Daddy really worked on those speeches," at home as well as at the office, his daughter Jane Aurell recalls, "and when he was finished, he would show the drafts to my mother." It is hard to overstate, Aurell says, the influence on Collins of growing up in a big and devout Methodist family that read the Bible every day and attended church and Sunday school without fail. Collins' best speeches have the echo of sermons.

School desegregation

Collins took office in 1955 within months of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation decision. His persuasiveness and persistence were quickly put to the test. Southern political leaders reacted first with shock, then with anger, then a mode of denial in which they tried to undo what had been done.

Collins, by contrast, vetoed a law that would have allowed school districts to close schools rather than admit blacks. The Legislature passed an interposition resolution in 1957, supporting the odd doctrine that states had a right to block or ignore a federal ruling they deemed unconstitutional. While unable to veto it, Collins sent it to President Eisenhower and other federal officials with a scathing cover note saying, "I decry it as an evil thing, whipped up by the demagogues and carried on the hot and erratic winds of passion, prejudice and hysteria."

In March 1960, late in his term, lunch counter sit-ins had spread to Florida, and violent clashes seemed a possibility. Collins stunned Floridians with a statewide television broadcast stating simply that African-Americans admitted to a store to shop had a right to be served.

To those who said "colored people should stay in their place," he countered, "Now, friends, that's not a Christian point of view. That's not a democratic point of view. That's not a realistic point of view. We can never stop Americans from struggling to be free." The television crew that had bantered with him on the way in was stonily silent as he left.

The civil rights sequel, once Collins left office, was heroic but politically costly. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson appointed him the first director of the Community Relations Service, a new entity to help localities

resolve civil rights conflicts peacefully. He was present at the March on Selma in 1965, walking back and forth over the Edmund Pettis Bridge as a mediator between leaders of the protest and law enforcement. A photograph captured him talking with Andrew Young and with Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King and Ralph Abernathy by his side.

When Collins ran for U.S. Senate in 1968, the photo circulated with the implication he was walking arm-in-arm with the protesters rather than doing his job mediating. Collins lost the general election in a race that was anything but close. He had become more outspoken on racial justice during those eight years out of office and was now well ahead of the typical Floridian. Not yet 60, his chances for elected office were finished.

The attention rightly paid to Collins' pivotal role in racial matters may overshadow awareness of the full range of issues he embraced while in office and after. In many instances, he planted a seed that did not fully bloom until much later.

He was a lifelong advocate of all forms of education. As a state senator in 1947, Collins was instrumental in Florida's first minimal foundational funding act. He promulgated the idea that every Floridian should have an institution of higher education within driving distance. The initiative, undertaken while Collins was governor, led to Florida's system of 28 community colleges, one of the nation's best. Collins was also the driving force behind the creation of the University of South Florida in 1960.

Although he served in the Legislature when its North Florida members made up the "Pork Chop Gang" of rural interests who had a stranglehold on legislative power, Collins never affiliated with them. Redistricting and constitutional revision to reflect the state's growing urban population was a top priority for which he could muster little support in his six years of trying. Collins served on the committee headed by Chesterfield Smith a decade later that drafted an entirely new Florida Constitution and broke, once and for all, from the Pork Chop past.

He was known as a "super salesman" for business development, seeing the eventual economic rise of Florida and the rest of the South when few others did. Despite his pro-development lean, Collins deplored the dredge-and-fill that spoiled both natural beauty and ecology. His focus on environmental matters grew in his retirement years.

He championed open meetings, ethics laws and stricter building codes — all achieved long after he had left office.

Political qualities

Collins had a well thought-through idea of what it took for a politician to be successful. "The qualities that to me are of the most importance in judging a political leader," Collins wrote, "are his integrity (faithfulness to the public interest in all actions he takes), his ability to make tough decisions, his administrative competence to get his decisions implemented and his style or charisma."

As for style and charisma, Sandy D'Alemberte, in a memorial tribute he wrote with Frank Sanchez, noted that a former *New York Times* reporter had praised Collins' "cultured Southern voice. ... It wasn't precious, mind you. It was just a beautiful rendition of language caressed with affection for the divine gift of the word."

D'Alemberte and Sanchez offer a perspective too on the easy charm and early mastery of the television medium that earned Collins a national profile chairing the contentious 1960 Democratic convention.

"All politicians have, during the course of their political careers, the equivalent of a political bank account, political capital if you will. During their careers, politicians make deposits ... in the form of doing things that are popular, that people will like, so the people will reward the politicians with popularity. There is nothing wrong with this. ... But if politicians are truly leaders, they also will be willing to make withdrawals from their political bank accounts. Withdrawals of political capital are much more difficult, costly and sometimes politically fatal."

Using this metaphor, one could say Collins kept a sufficient balance of political capital as governor and later in his career to advocate unpopular, forward-thinking positions. But at the time of the 1968 U.S. Senate election, his account was overdrawn.

During Collins' time in office, Republicans were barely a factor and partisanship thus not an issue. But when a public policy center at Florida State University named in his honor opened in 1988, working across party lines was a reality. Republican Gov. Bob Martinez and other founders, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported, expressed hope that the center "could become a non-partisan wellspring of ideas to help business and government solve Florida's problems and direct its future." Characteristically aphoristic, Collins commented, "This ought to be a means of proceeding to distinguish what's right rather than who's right."

Government by the people

But Collins, in office and out, also left no doubt where he stood. "Not favoring a strong government for the sake of strength alone," Collins said, he believed that "government remains the one vehicle through which all the people can work together to accomplish goals which they, as individuals and through private enterprise and resource, are unable to achieve."

At a Leadership Florida forum in 1989, future Collins biographer Martin Dyckman suggested that "the politics of constructive change and leadership" had all but vanished in Florida. Much more cautious leaders were captive to opinion polls and a money-raising arms race. Neither Collins nor Reubin Askew could have been successful candidates in that climate, Dyckman said.

Those factors have not turned around in the years since. The current political scene — on the state and national level — includes extreme partisanship, attack ads, continuous fundraising, nonstop cable commentary, congressional gridlock and the no-holds barred antigovernment stridency of the tea party faction. The public is highly distrustful of government and cynical of programs and services, particularly those emanating from Washington.

To borrow D'Alemberte's formulation, it may be uphill work under these circumstances for anyone to accumulate the political capital Collins had in his heyday and deployed so boldly.

Nonetheless, ambitious contemporary political and policy leaders may examine the legacy and conclude that LeRoy Collins' courage and integrity have not gone out of season. Of nearly equal importance, as Collins wrote in his assessment of political effectiveness, is the ability to make tough decisions and the administrative competence to get those decisions implemented — even if credit for those hard decisions isn't forthcoming.

Or, as the Florida House of Representatives put it in the posthumous resolution naming Collins the Floridian of the Century, he was, and remains, "a moral beacon to us all."

Rick Edmonds is on the faculty of the Poynter Institute, which owns the Tampa Bay Times. This is adapted from an essay Edmonds wrote for the 25th anniversary of the Leroy Collins Institute. The full essay and a 10-minute film on Collins are available at collinsinstitute.fsu.edu.

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