

# Letters To The Editor

## Poll Taxes In The South

Mr. Sullivan contends that the abolition of the poll tax by the Congress of the United States is an invasion of the constitutional right of the several States to determine qualifications for voting. Mr. Sullivan could easily have found out that during extended hearings in the House of Representatives and in the Senate over the past two years on the question of constitutionality of Federal anti-poll tax legislation not a single witness has appeared attacking either the constitutionality of the bill or its fundamental merit.

On the contrary, such distinguished constitutional authorities as Senator George Norris of Nebraska, Senator Claude Pepper of Florida, Professor Walton Hamilton of Yale University Law School, Professor J. J. Morrison of Tulane University Law School, and at least a dozen other professors of constitutional law at leading American universities have declared that the poll tax is not a qualification for voting. Moreover, Mr. Sullivan could have consulted the opinion of the Supreme Court of the United States in *United States vs Classic*, which clearly establishes the right of Congress to enact legislation to prevent corruption in any form in Federal elections. This case gives Congress the right to prevent any State from making a mockery of the democratic right of franchise. Eminent witnesses, including leading white Southerners, have testified before congressional committees of the ugly corruption which attends Federal elections in poll-tax States through manipulation by corrupt politicians of thousands of "bought and paid for" poll-tax receipts which the individual voters never see and never use.

Mr. Sullivan attempts to minimize the payment of the poll tax as a barrier to voting and claims that it is a restriction of equal application to both Negro and white voters. These contentions brand him as ignorant both of history and economics. He need only read the history of the Virginia Constitutional Conventions and study the anti-Negro role of Carter Glass in those conventions to convince himself that the poll-tax laws frozen into State constitutions were openly and avowedly intended to prevent

Negro citizens from voting. Thus his suggestion that the States themselves will remedy the situation is without merit because in the eight States which continue poll-tax requirements, the provision is a part of the State constitution, and thus is so deeply embedded in the law that it has been a simple thing to frustrate the will of Southern people to abolish the poll tax.

As to the economics of the poll-tax restriction, Mr. Sullivan's phrase "a small tax or fee of a dollar or so" becomes in fact a fee of \$36 in the State of Georgia for many voters who are compelled to pay all back taxes charged against them from the age of 21 to the age of 45. In other States similar retroactive taxation makes the fee range from \$1 to \$24. For the millions of landless peasants of the South the fee of "a dollar or so" is an intolerable hardship because this fee represents a substantial portion of the cash income of individuals in this group. If Mr. Sullivan had sought the truth, he would have found that the actual effect of the poll tax is to disfranchise 10 million otherwise qualified voters in eight Southern States.

The greatest disservice rendered by Mr. Sullivan in this article is found in his suggestion that Negro leaders for selfish reasons are forgetting the grave war crises confronting America and seeking profit for the Negro people at the expense of America. This is a foul slander. Anti-poll-tax legislation is a war measure. It has the support of the American Federation of Labor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the railway brotherhoods, Southern Methodist Church Women, and scores of outstanding patriotic American organizations, Negro and white. These groups support the effort to abolish the poll tax with a clear understanding that its abolition will mean the heightening of the morale of 10 million voteless Negro and white Americans in the South. Mr. Sullivan might well have taken his own advice when asked to write about anti-poll-tax legislation and might well have admitted that he had "no worthwhile comment."

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