

**Charlie Fern Remarks for The East Texas Historical Association's Fall Program
"Jimmy Turman and the Origins of Compassionate Conservatism"
September 16, 2005**

Thank you for the kind introduction. I'm pleased to talk about the history of compassionate conservatism as it relates to Speaker Jimmy Turman. Based on my own personal and professional background, I suppose that I have a somewhat unique perspective.

As Jimmy said, my first professional exposure to Texas politics was as a writer in Ann Richards' office. I was in my early 20s and had just moved back to Texas from California. I accepted the job a few months before the election.

At the time, I didn't realize that when your boss loses an election, it's time to look for a new job. I kept showing up for work every day.

In hindsight, I guess you could say that one of George W. Bush's first acts of compassionate conservatism was letting me keep my job.

But compassionate conservatism didn't begin with George W. It didn't even begin with his father, George H.W. Bush, although he did earn the label back in 1970, during his Senate campaign against Lloyd Bentsen.

The label came from Bob Eckhardt, a liberal Congressman already serving in DC. In the Houston Chronicle, Eckhardt said George H. W. Bush would work out well for the people of Harris County because he had compassion and was a conservative. Eckhardt continued, saying "It would be interesting working with this little delegation of three members from Harris County – Eckhardt the liberal, Bob Casey the conservative, and George H. W. Bush, who had compassion and was a conservative."

My own research has revealed that compassionate conservatism sprouted even earlier in Texas history.

It has roots in the alluvial blacklands of North Texas in the first half of the 1900s.... a place where the soil was as fertile for political statesmen as it was for cotton, corn and cows.

In those days there were few republicans and two breeds of Democrat: the liberal and the conservative. Today I submit to you that one of the original compassionate conservatives was the conservative democrat, and no one better embodied that combination of traits than a gentleman from Fannin County...named Jimmy Turman.

First, though, a look at Texas during Jimmy Turman's formative years:

Around 1930, the Texas landscape was littered with farms and gentlemen farmers; with cotton gins and burgeoning oilfields; with statesmen and states' righters.

In Fannin County, cotton and corn were king. Few citizens had the benefit of an education. But you could count on one sure fact: Throughout the county's history, the people remained solidly democratic.

Texas farmers didn't look to the state capitol for answers to their problems. They looked to the land. People worked hard and prayed hard. They were simple, decent, meticulous people who longed for progress and a better life for their families. They wanted progress on their own terms. They didn't want state and federal governments telling them how to run their lives and their farms.

This was the world that Jimmy Turman was born into. He was raised the son of a tenant farmer, and farming was the first thing he knew as a child. He milked cows and worked around the barn. He ran cotton crops, guiding a cultivator down long straight rows, dropping seeds, picking weeds, pulling cotton from plants, sticky fingers, two sides at a time.

Whole days could be spent staring at the back end of a horse and a mule who were harnessed with a heavy load. I suspect that working with a tired jackass at the end of the day might give a kid a head start in politics.

In the lonely cotton fields, Jimmy lightened the workload by singing at the top of his lungs. He didn't have a cotton-patch yell. He had a cotton patch chorus.

Young Jimmy Turman had a real gift. He could see past life on a farm. He saw his way to school and worked hard as a student. He graduated from Gober high school in 1945. He was second in his class at a time when the majority of young men his age never finished high school.

Again, it appears that a farm animal helped prepare Jimmy for the future. He went to a local bank to ask for a college loan. The banker promptly rejected the request. Instead, he suggested that Jimmy ought to borrow \$100 for a dairy cow. Jimmy gratefully accepted the offer. Shortly thereafter he enrolled at East Texas State University in Commerce. The fictitious cow and odd jobs got him through school. He graduated in 1948 with a bachelor of science degree.

Jimmy taught elementary school in Wolfe City and became principal of an elementary school in Paris. Every Saturday he would drive 20 miles to Commerce to continue his education. He earned his master's degree in 1949.

After two years in the Navy, he enrolled at the University of Texas and earned a Ph.D. in education in 1957. It was during this time that he fell in love with politics and decided to run for office. He was elected to the legislature in 1954, re-elected in 1956, and re-elected by a 3-to-1 margin in 1958.

Jimmy came of political age during a tumultuous time. Texans were wrestling with Civil Rights and a looming state budget crisis.

And the Democratic Party was at war with itself. Liberals were trying to wrestle control from the conservatives. They hoped that some would defect to the Republican party and make this possible.

One critical ingredient added to the chaos: Democratic Baptists from the Bible Belt had to reckon with a Catholic running for the highest office in the land.

What a time to be a young democrat in Austin.

As a legislator, Jimmy drew from his East Texas roots. By today's standards, his values were somewhat conservative -- steeped in courage, integrity, religion, and personal honor.

Jimmy also drew inspiration from a neighbor in Bonahm... a family friend and mentor, Mr. Sam Rayburn. Jimmy followed in his footsteps through the Texas legislature and into the speaker's chair in Austin.

I suspect that further research might show that Mr. Sam was also a compassionate conservative. But you wouldn't have heard it from him. The only thing Sam Rayburn professed to be was a Democrat.

Sam Rayburn said, "I belong to no faction except the Democratic Party....if that offends anybody, let him make the most of it...."

And if Jimmy ever took any advice from Mr. Sam, surely it was these offerings, which Rayburn gave to the world over the decades of his career:

- While your responsibility is to the people of your district ... you should try to vote in a way that would do the greatest good to the greatest number of people throughout the length and breadth of Texas.

In other words, let Texans run Texas. It's a philosophy that made Bob Bullock. More from Mr. Sam...He said:

- One of the strongest motives in human endeavor is the hope of acquiring the title to a house and to certain aids in making a livelihood. Small and privately owned farms, gardens, shops and stores have existed through the ages, and will continue to exist. The people who own them and operate them are the bulwark of civilization.
- Compassion, human tenderness for the elderly – are not these qualities commended by our church and spiritual leaders? They are not new. The newness lies merely in putting them to work instead of prating about them.

- Individual character and initiative and human dignity are characteristics which are cultivated in the environment of the home.

And finally,

- In politics you have to know how the people feel and what they are thinking. If you don't feel what you can't see, you are dead ... You must compromise when necessary. Have faith in the people because they are good and fair. Having common sense isn't enough. You have to exercise it.

As a state legislator, Jimmy Turman was guided by similar values. Of his record, Texas Observer editor Ronnie Dugger said this:

“Jimmy Turman is what we in Texas call an East Texas Liberal... Coming from a town of 150 with four churches, last year he sponsored the bill to outlaw nudists, who certainly would not be welcome at Sunday school in Gober. On taxes, he is a liberal person, and on state spending he is a humanitarian.”

In 1960, the three-term legislator ran for speaker of the house. The race was a tumultuous one, and it came down to two candidates: Turman and Wade Spillman of McAllen. The candidates had to draw a line of distinction between themselves. It was a conservative line. This is how Jimmy Turman described himself in one newspaper. He said,

“I believe in less federal control in everything – farming, education, and so forth. In other words, I am a conservative states' righter. I'm a liberal in the areas of humanitarian needs, like education and welfare. But everything else, on a matter of any other item in state government, I'm just as conservative as the next man about spending a dollar...I favor trying to do at the state level what the state ought to do and not yielding to the federal government. If we do not provide adequate public education, we are going to have more federal intervention.”

The story of the 1961 speaker's race is a compelling one. Unfortunately it is a story for another time and another forum. But I will offer a few excerpts from Jimmy's nominating speech, as delivered by DeWitt Hale. He said,

“Here is a man admired and respected by all ... He can wear the mantle of greatness without shedding the cloak of compassion or the hat of humility. He can match his ability with courage and a character. In short, the gentleman from Fannin County will measure up to the best of the illustrious men who have preceded him in this office...with full confidence in his ability...firm in the conviction that the soil of Fannin County has again given to the people of Texas another young man destined for greatness, I take immense pride and great pleasure in nominating ... the distinguished gentleman from Fannin County, the Honorable James A. Turman.”

Jimmy Turman won, 83 to 66, on January 10, 1961.

Months later the Dallas Morning News praised him, saying, “Speaker of the House James Turman has shown a commendable fairness with a policy of bringing bills to the floor and airing them.”

It would be difficult – and beside the point – to list his accomplishments here. I will say that Jimmy Turman is perhaps most proud of two laws passed during his tenure: a pay raise for Texas teachers and the sales tax bill. He worked hard to pass them both.

Fresh from the success of his speakership, Jimmy Turman put his name in the race for lieutenant governor. By then the Democratic Party was a tough place to define yourself and your future, but Jimmy was undaunted.

He said, “As Speaker of the Texas House running as a candidate for lieutenant governor, I was also concerned about the (party) labels. I had been called a liberal, however, I considered myself a conservative. I was concerned about social issues, programs, people, and I was concerned about the needs of those people that could be provided by government.”

You cannot underestimate the creativity or the shrewdness of the gentleman from Fannin County. While some were claiming compassion, Jimmy devised his own label. He called himself a “conservative with a heart.”

His defeat fell on the brink of another disaster for the Democrats – the rise of a two-party system in Texas. Chaos within the party spilled out into a race for U.S. Senate. In the end, there emerged an unlikely winner...the first Republican senator the state had ever seen. And, as some historians see it, two-party politics was born in Texas when Republican John Tower was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1961.

Of course, Jimmy’s career continued, and indeed flourished in Washington, D.C., and later back in Texas. Perhaps there is a lesson or two to be learned from it.

In today’s political climate, Jimmy Turman’s brand of humanitarian concern and his conservative ideas about the role of government have gone their separate ways. It almost seems that when the old Texas Democratic Party finally split, the Republicans got sole custody of some good ideas, and the Democrats got sole custody of some others. Perhaps today’s politicians would do well to look back to a time not so long ago when being a compassionate conservative was a natural blend of values...regardless of the party listed on your voter registration card. Thank you.