Orval E. Faubus: Out of Socialism into Realism

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Orval E. Faubus was reared a liberal. His father, Sam Faubus, was a Socialist who detested capitalism and bigotry with equal fervor. The son's critics, myself included, have accused him through the years of selling out the beliefs of his father on both race and economics. The story may be less straightforward than that.

Orval Faubus came to power in Arkansas after World War II when two things were happening:

First, the old populist revolt that had inflamed the hills for several generations was burning itself out. The end of Faubus's own radicalism coincided almost perfectly with the decline of radicalism among his people not only in the Ozarks but right across the southern uplands. Prosperity, meager as it was, finally intruded into the hills and nudged out not only the Socialists like his father but also the intellectually tamer populists who had used their hill-country base to shower invective on the Delta planters and their establishment cohorts in banking, business, and industry. Resentment slowly began to give way to the other side of the populist coin, hope. Hope and appetite and a belief still current, vestigially populist: that our fellow hillbilly Sam Walton made it and, with a little luck, I can make it, too.

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1. V. O. Key Jr., Southern Politics in State and Nation. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1954). 8. Populism was not restricted to the hill country, but, as Key points out, radicalism had a more marked influence in the thin-soiled uplands than in the planter-controlled delta.
Second, a national phenomenon with far-reaching consequences was coming to a head during the 1950s. The racial equilibrium of the South was being extraordinarily disturbed, not merely by local agitation but more importantly by external forces that eventually would sweep away the entire breastwork of white supremacist defenses. The liberal Faubus might have thrown in with the national mood, a growing impatience with southern heel-dragging. Realistically, however, how much can he be blamed for choosing to be seen as defender of the local faith, no matter how little he shared that faith? What would have been the fate of a governor who chose the other side? Some of my heroes have argued that he could have exerted leadership for the rights of blacks and survived. Or that, at the least, he could have died an honorable political death. Maybe so. But Orval Faubus had seen quite enough of honorable struggle for lost causes in his boyhood home. And there was something else. By the time he was grown, he had seen enough fear, loss, and death to last a lifetime.

Literally from the beginning, Orval Eugene Faubus’s life was threatened. He weighed two-and-one-half pounds when he was born the night of January 7, 1910, and was so frail that the midwife expected him to die before morning. One night when he was a year old, he caught the croup and stopped breathing. His father rushed him outside into the cold air and plunged a finger into his throat to save his life. The toddler was just learning to talk when he wandered from the house and fell into a deep spring of water and somehow did not drown but climbed out just as his mother got there.

Danger continued to surround him as he grew and became part of the community. The year he was seven, one playmate died of diphtheria and another was crushed to death by a falling tree. During another year flux swept the community and killed two children in a neighboring family.

Life was not only perilous at Greasy Creek; it was also hard. Southern Madison County was like most of the Ozarks at that time. The residents scraped by. The towns had a small prosperity, but the countryside provided little more than subsistence. Rural people like the Faubuses raised almost all their food. Shoes and coats were practically luxuries because they had to be bought with cash, and cash was pitiable scarce. Even kerosene for the lamps was so dear that, after John D. Rockefeller cornered the market and raised the price, young Orval had to walk behind the wagon and carry the filled can the two miles from Combs to Greasy Creek, so as not to spill any—or so he recollected in 1964 when Rockefeller’s grandson Winthrop tried to wrest the governorship of Arkansas from him.

Even granted that poverty and fear may be goads to ambition, it still seems extraordinary that a youngster could rise from such circumstances in such a place to be governor of his state, to keep the job longer than any other person, and to become a public figure known around the world.

Greasy Creek was, in every sense, the end of the road. Orval had to walk twelve miles to his first job across mountain trails; no roads went there from his home. Communication was primitive. News in Greasy Creek—that is, any report that reached beyond Madison County and the community grapevine—was limited to what certain elders deemed worth passing on from the occasional mail subscription to the Kansas City Weekly Star or the even rarer subscription to the Arkansas Gazette or the Daily Oklahoman. Politics was conducted almost entirely face-to-face, man-to-man, in a kind of slow-motion pulsation radiating from the county seat at Huntsville. Politics was also an important diversion, and there we have a clue to his escape and survival.

From his earliest years, young Orval carried a double burden of shyness and pride. He was not strong enough to excel in physical competition. He turned to the private world of words and found that he had a talent not only for language but also for retaining information. Through reading magazines and books, he learned of a world far different from the hillside farm of his father. He dreamed of entering that world.

There were two ways out for a young man of his background and temperament: teaching and politics. His mother and father together pushed the shy son toward the first. His father pushed him, perhaps unwittingly, toward the second.

John Samuel Faubus was anything but shy. He came from a large, loud, sometimes boisterous family of fifteen children, counting step-siblings. He claimed to have a fourth-grade education, but that was a flexible interpretation of the record. He once confessed that he had attended only three or four months of school by age eleven and that he did not learn to write until he was twenty, about the time he married.
But before the last of his seven children was born, Sam Faubus had become known as one of the best-informed people in his part of Arkansas. The same year Orval was born, Sam took the lead in one of the most baffling political movements in the history of the state. He and two friends signed up most of the voting-age population on Greasy Creek as members of the Socialist party.

Not that socialism itself was baffling, although many people do not appreciate how significant a hold it had on Arkansas at that time. The southwestern states of Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas provided a substantial vote for the Socialist party candidate for president, Eugene V. Debs, in the election of 1912. The mystery is how Marxist socialism penetrated to the fastnesses of Greasy Creek, twenty-five miles from the nearest county seat, seventy years before the first pavement would be laid on the one dirt road to the place. The best guess is that it was imported by a gentlemanly old bachelor from the North, probably from Illinois, one O. T. Green. After a sojourn in a boarding house at Combs, where his socialist views caused a few embarrassing arguments, Green settled on a small farm near Sam Faubus’s place. He raised goats and peacocks, corresponded with Socialist acquaintances in other states, and befriended the young neighbor whose inquiring mind intrigued him.2

From whatever source, Socialist publications began to appear in the Faubus household. And Sam, once convinced that the big corporations controlled the American economy and that capitalism was his enemy, became an outspoken advocate of the socialist system. He and his friend Arch Cornett, a teacher, wrote eloquent letters to the editor of the Huntsville newspaper denouncing the entrenched interests.3 Their concern spread to political reform; Sam circulated petitions calling for woman’s suffrage, old-age pensions, and abolition of the vote-restricting poll tax.

In May 1910 Sam and his friends formally established the Mill Creek Local of the Socialist party. The charter from the state committee was addressed to “the comrades of Combs” and carried the names of ten men, four of them named Faubus. Whoever copied the names apparently inverted Sam’s initials so that he is listed as S. J. Faubus. The post of secretary, carrying with it the responsibility of chief organizer, went to him. Arch Cornett, O. T. Green, and Sam Faubus became the most devoted members of the south Madison County local.4

As many as thirty people, including some from neighboring communities, might have been members of the Mill Creek Local at one time. The party had a majority of the adult residents of the Greasy Creek community. The local was large enough to provide the swing vote in district election contests between the Democrats and Republicans.6 Madison County had at least two other thriving Socialist locals, one at Witter and the other at Kingston. Several other locals sprang up across the Ozarks.7

Sam and Arch joined other Socialists in opposing World War I. They almost went to prison for their troubles. Just before the war ended, the two men were arrested for distributing literature protesting the war. The charge was serious: violating the Alien and Sedition Act. Only the timely end of the war and the help of a good lawyer kept them out of the penitentiary. Sam has been referred to in recent years as an “old-time mountain Socialist.” The designation suggests that people like Sam Faubus were too innocent to fully understand the implications of socialism. The old man would be indignant at that condescension if he were alive. It is probably true that the Socialists of the Southwest were less rigorous in the faith than their comrades in the industrial East. But they were apparently earnest in their attempt to change capitalism in the United States. Their hatred of Wall Street and capitalism was as intense as that of their hero Debs and any of the eastern Marxists.

Sam’s interest in public affairs rubbed off on his eldest child. Orval read the Socialist party literature that came to the house. He even joined his father on at least one occasion when the two of them debated the merits of socialism with a pair of teachers at nearby St. Paul.

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2 Bonnie Pace, interview by author, November 9, 1990, Combs, AR.
3 Ibid; Orval E. Faubus, interview by author, June 14, 1988, Conway, AR.
4 Madison County Record (AR), March 9, 1933, from the Combs news column by "Jimmie Higgins," Sam Faubus’s nom de plume, March 16, 1933, article by Arch Cornett.
6 Faubus speech to University of Arkansas Young Democrats, April 30, 1993, Fayetteville.
7 Faubus to author, February 11, 1993.
In 1935, after he was married and had been teaching several years, Orval indulged in his most serious flirtation with the political left. He hitchhiked to Commonwealth College, a labor self-help school near Mena, with the intention of gaining there the college education that he had not been able to afford elsewhere. The college comprised Socialists, Communists, labor organizers of various persuasions, and a smattering of unaffiliated idealists. They apparently had in common a conviction that the American economic system, then in collapse, was basically flawed.

How long Faubus remained on the campus has been disputed, but he was there long enough to give a May Day speech and be elected president of the student body. He says he never formally enrolled, but simply took part in campus activities in what sounds like a walk-on role.

Whatever the case, there is little doubt that young Faubus about that time began to develop a streak of political realism that was largely missing in his father. He shook the dust of Commonwealth from his feet after a few weeks or at most a few months. Instead of turning him into a crypto-Communist, as some of his later enemies put it about, the close encounter with Marxism seems to have left him eventually disenchanted. It might be argued that the Commonwealth experience, far from producing a Communist subversive, was actually the beginning of a slow swing to the right that would send him into the conservative orbit more than twenty years later.

Back at Greasy Creek, Sam continued to urge socialism on his son. But Orval understood early that if he wanted a future in politics, a minority party with a radical reputation was not the way to go. And he was definitely interested in a political career.

Luckily, he was offered an alternative by national developments. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932. The New Deal, with its extensive social programs, co-opted some of the Socialist party's more appealing ideas. Orval became a New Dealer. Eventually, so did Sam.

Orval remained a Democrat, at least nominally, throughout his long career. He remained a liberal of declining intensity until his second term as governor.

Faubus entered public life just as his part of America, the South, was starting to revive after three-quarters of a century of lassitude. In the language of economics, the South was entering the take-off stage in 1940—just when young Faubus was proving himself in county politics and entering his own take-off stage. He had been elected circuit clerk of his county in 1938 and had hopes of moving up to county judge—or even higher, with a little luck. Along with his growing success in politics, it would be his fate to come to maturity while his region was seeing its first real love affair with capitalism. The affair would bring greater prosperity to more people than the South had ever seen. It would also bring the evils of make-it-fast go-getterism: industrial pollution, runaway greed, corruption of institutions, and what is probably misnamed as conservatism in politics. As governor during the 1950s and 1960s, Faubus would preside over his state's immersion in all this, the good and the bad.

For starters, he plunged headily into the race for industrialization. He saw that the only way that backward Arkansas could ever catch up with the rest of the country was to build a base of industrial production to balance the state's traditional and always uncertain agricultural base. He induced the conscience-ridden Baptist playwright Winthrop Rockefeller, who had fled to Arkansas to escape a disastrous marriage and his family's disapproval, to head up Arkansas's program for attracting industry. They made a good team, the compassionate capitalist and the Socialist-reared hillbilly. Steadily, out-of-state industry moved into the state and enriched its payroll. Faubus later estimated that 125,000 industrial jobs had been added during his twelve-year administration. The new industry also, in many cases, exploited the state's resources and fouled its air, water, and forests. Not much thought was given to regulation of industry in those days. A people who had never had any easy factory jobs—easy compared to subsistence farming—was not concerned with unfortunate consequences. Neither was the governor, except for a few notable instances when his Ozarks upbringing asserted itself, as it did, for example, when he threw in with the environmentalists and stopped the Corps of Engineers from damming the Buffalo River.

The business establishment of Little Rock was openly contemptuous of the country boy from Madison County when he first became

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governor. He swallowed his pride and set out to win them over. Within a year he had made peace with many of the capital's go-getters, including some who had held him up as a figure of amusement at posh cocktail parties. Even after he had made peace with them, many of the country club set continued for years to poke fun at his country speech and country ways.

Faibus never became a country clubber. He built his own set of affluent friends and associates. At the center of his set was another self-made man, a country boy who took his own revenge against the city sophisticates by simply piling up a larger fortune than any of them had. W. R. (Witt) Stephens was already a behind-the-scenes power in Arkansas politics when Faibus became governor. He and Faibus quickly formed an alliance of mutual benefit.

For Stephens the alliance provided friendly, profitable treatment from state agencies and administration allies in every institution from banks to the state legislature to scores of courthouses and city halls across the state. Early in 1957, when the state Supreme Court struck down a lucrative pricing arrangement for Stephens’s Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company—one that Faibus’s compliant Public Service Commission had approved—the legislature, equally compliant, overruled the court and passed a law reinstalling the pricing arrangement. The entire exercise, from the court decision to the governor’s signature on the new law, took only a week. Stephens got the same friendly reception when his various enterprises needed official help on other matters. For example, bonds for municipalities, school districts, and other public bodies were almost always handled through Stephens, Inc., or one of its allies.

For Faibus the alliance provided vital support during the increasingly expensive election campaigns that he was obliged to run. Stephens not only contributed heavily to Faibus’s campaigns, but he also cajoled, conned, and arm-twisted his many wealthy friends around the state and persuaded them to throw their collective weight behind Faibus. With the wealth of the Stephens combine behind him, Faibus became almost unbeatable. Faibus spread the benefits to his friends. An ally who headed the state Democratic party became the lawyer for a large Stephens gas company in Fort Smith. A number of Faibus administration officials, including members of the governor’s staff, became owners of cheap Ark-La stock before the stock price, inspired by action of the Public Service Commission, increased substantially.

Among the most reluctant power bases to come around to Faibus was the Arkansas Power and Light Company. AP and L had had its way with the state’s politics for many years. Governor Francis A. Cherry had been the latest in a long series of public figures who had been in the utility’s debt. He found the association so congenial that he raised no objection when AP and L, with customary arrogance but uncharacteristic ineptness, raised its electric rates during the 1954 election campaign. Faibus leapt on the issue. He had already come to the utility’s attention as a gnat-like irritant several years earlier when he had had the gall to editorialize in his Madison County Record against the company and in favor of publicly owned electric co-operatives. Now that he was governor, Faibus knew that he could expect no favors from the power company.

The flexible Witt Stephens had become a Faibus man in a matter of hours after the voters turned out his man Cherry in the Democratic primary. The men who ran AP and L were more stiff-necked. It took a while for them to absorb the new reality. Within one eighteen-month period during Faibus's first term, the Public Service Commission—not yet dominated by him, but certainly alert to his growing power—granted two rate increases to Stephens's gas company. One of those allowed Stephens to sharply boost his rates to AP and L for the gas used in power generation. The power company objected, to no avail. During the same eighteen months, AP and L applied to the PSC for two increases of its own. It was turned down each time. When the power company persisted and applied a third time, the commission finally allowed it a fraction of its requested increase—just enough, it turned out, to pay for the rise in its gas bill. Witt Stephens made no secret of his satisfaction at lining his pockets with money from his adversaries at AP and L.

It can be argued that Faibus, with Stephens providing the goad, broke the generations-long dominance of AP and L over the state of

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10 Ibid., October 19, 1956, p. 2.
Arkansas. Once the men in charge there understood their new situation, they lined up behind the hillbilly governor. Years later, Faubus could speak of the men at AP and L with friendly warmth. They became good corporate citizens, he said, with no discernible trace of triumph in his face.

There were many others from the moneyed establishment whom he came to count as supporters and in some cases social friends. They included builders, developers, insurance and real estate executives, bond dealers, road builders, heavy machinery sellers, printing company owners, newspaper publishers, and high-powered lawyers. They also included a disproportionate share of the wealthy landowners of the plantation country. These last helped to push the socialist-reared, egalitarian man from the hills in an unexpected direction on the most explosive domestic issue of the mid-twentieth century.

Race had been the defining quality in southern politics from the beginning. A dominant consideration of the white leaders of the deep South had been to assure the subordination of the black population. The issue might lie dormant for long years, then erupt when something threatened the racial equilibrium. Much of the middle and upper South was not dominated directly by the race issue, but such was the political strength and determination of the low-country black belt—"a skeleton holding together the South," V. O. Key called it—that all of the region was in its grip. 11

The populist revolt divided the hills from the black belt. The latter allied itself with the conservative business forces in the cities and towns to beat down the radicals flourishing in the hills. That schism continued into the twentieth century. Rebellion simmered in the uplands, but the lowlands seldom lost control of the state governments. Alabama might throw up a Hugo Black or a Jim Folsom, but the "big mules" of the cities and the planters of the black belt finally dominated. The same was true in Arkansas. The hills produced political figures of prominence—J. W. Fulbright, Brooks Hays, J. W. Trimble, Clyde Ellis, Sid McMath—but none of them succeeded without the support of the powerful forces of the Delta and their business allies. Any who resisted those forces were punished.

Faubus was the latest in a line of hill-country progressives. The Delta landowners were suspicious of him. In the early 1950s few questioned their ability to punish their opponents at the state capital. And yet there were signs that Arkansas was beginning to turn away from the Delta domination and toward a more racially neutral politics. Key, writing in the late 1940s, thought that Arkansas, along with Texas and Florida, seemed destined to develop a non-southern sort of politics, one no longer ruled by the negative influence of race. 12 On the other hand, there was no doubt that race still had the power to inflame large numbers of white voters, and not just in the lowlands. In Arkansas, Jim Johnson demonstrated as late as the gubernatorial campaign of 1956 that white feelings were still intense, especially in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision requiring school desegregation. Indeed, it was Johnson's strong showing against him in 1956 that persuaded Faubus to pay more attention to the voice from the Delta.

But if anyone had been listening for nuance and not simply volume in that voice, he might have detected a note of weakness and even desperation. From the beginning it had been the white fear of being overrun by blacks that had inspired the success of the Delta's political oppression. The term black belt referred to a swath of southern counties where African Americans had a majority of the population. Arkansas, admittedly one of the least "threatened" states, had fifteen counties with black majorities in 1900. That number declined steadily as the century wore on: eleven in 1920, then nine in 1940. 13 By 1950 the state had only six counties where blacks predominated. 14 Yet those six counties, relying on the racism of varying virulence to be found in Little Rock and elsewhere, effectively imposed their politics of race on the other sixty-nine counties. Looking back across these forty years, racial fear seems to have been given more authority than it deserved. Alongside the

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11Key, Southern Politics, 666.
12Ibid., 669. For a discussion of the negative influence of race in shaping the black belt's domination of southern politics, see Chapters 1 and 31.
13Ibid., 672.
numerical decline in the black "threat," the state was becoming increasingly urban and presumably more politically sophisticated. It was also poised to industrialize and prosper. Altogether, Arkansas was just at the take-off stage in both politics and economics and might have been expected finally to cast off the burden of racial politics. Thanks to a convergence of currents, national and local, it did not.

What happened is well known. The Little Rock School District was ready to desegregate its first public school in the fall of 1957. A few other Arkansas districts, bowing to the Supreme Court's Brown decision of 1954, had already taken that step, and Faubus had accepted their decisions. He balked at Little Rock. Saying he had reason to fear violence if the plan went forward, he ordered out the National Guard to block the nine black pupils assigned to Central High. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent army troops to suppress segregationist mobs, protect the black youngsters, and enforce the authority of the federal courts that had ordered desegregation. The event dominated headlines for months, not only in Arkansas but around the world. Faubus, by forcing the federal government to intervene first in Little Rock and then in other places around the South, probably hastened the end of the southern resistance to black civil rights. His action also ensured him six two-year terms as governor and earned him a reputation, fairly or not, as a sellout to the politics of fear that had been exploited long and effectively by the Delta planters.

It might be argued that Orval Faubus captured the Delta as certainly as the Delta captured him; that the influence of the lowlands was on the wane, and that this canny hill man stepped in at the historically propitious moment and took over the whole state, the Delta included. Not much stretch of his sympathies was required. He had always felt warmly toward the poor people of his own section. It was easy to include the poor white people of the Delta, along with their betters, in his affections. That his sympathies were not expansive enough to include a public declaration of friendship for the poor black people of the Delta might have seemed to him a small price to pay. In any event, a kind of regional harmony ensured that Arkansas had not seen since the swamps were slashed and burned and turned into plantations, to be worked and in a perverse way dominated by slaves and the fear they engendered. For the first time, lowlanders and hill people were not competing for control of the capital. They shared control of the governor's office and, through the harmony Faubus imposed, the legislature, as well.

The race issue, after its last sensational eruption in 1957, finally lost its grip on the Arkansas mind. With the election of Winthrop Rockefeller, the aberrant moderate Republican who succeeded Faubus, the black population pretty well ceased to exercise the power of fear that it had had on the state's politics throughout its history. Black voters achieved this paradoxical loss of control through the happy circumstance of becoming important in the state's electoral system. They had voted in some numbers for several years, but those in the Delta had had no real choice on election day. Rockefeller brought blacks into the system in large numbers, voting more or less freely and in any case jubilantly, although there were those who claimed that the millionaire New Yorker voted his blacks as surely as any Delta planter ever had. The difference was this: Rockefeller made it worthwhile financially, in some cases, to vote right; the old planter voting his field hands had made voting right a condition of employment.

Before Rockefeller, no statewide candidate who was perceived as soft on the Negro question could attain and hold office if any creditable opponent insisted on exploiting that softness. Since Rockefeller, no candidate has achieved any lasting success without the approval of black voters. Interestingly enough, that change began during the last years of Faubus's administration. He quietly achieved a rapprochement with many black leaders, including L. C. Bates, the husband of his old nemesis, Daisy Bates, who led the Arkansas branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. L. C. Bates frequently offered advice to Faubus during the mid-1960s, and on at least one occasion, according to Faubus, urged him to run for re-election. The Faubus administration also supported a reform of the voter registration laws that paved the way for relieving the Delta planters of the burden of buying thousands of poll taxes and trucking all those black workers to the polls every election day.

Faubus accommodated to the prevailing political realities, as he saw

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them. He continued into old age to insist that he was a true liberal, meaning a New Dealer. But he kept up a running flirtation with Republicans and conservatives during the decades following his tenure in office. He offered advice to such Republicans as John Connally of Texas and Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt of Arkansas. He had friendly contacts with the Nixon White House and expressed his gratification that Nixon had carried Arkansas in 1972. He was friendly with the conservative administration of Harding College, a Searcy, Arkansas, institution connected to the Church of Christ. He was active in the presidential campaign of George C. Wallace in 1968.

Did Faubus betray his father’s idealism when he abandoned the left wing and opted for the more conservative mainstream? This is a more difficult question than it appears to be at a glance. Answering it requires going beyond historical evidence and making a speculative leap of judgment. The heart of the question is this: What kind of Socialist was Sam Faubus? Was he a revolutionary Marxist who would have been at home in Eastern Europe? Or was his socialism more American, that is, more diluted? Even some of America’s Socialists were fairly dedicated Marxists; was Sam one of those? If Sam Faubus wanted to overthrow the American capitalist system and install a government-controlled economy, then how could he bear to see his famous son become an established part of the system he hated? But if Sam was actually a populist who liked to call himself a Socialist, then his son’s success would have pleased him.

While the more determined Socialists worked for a fundamental change in the economic system, many populists merely raged against its inequities. Remove whatever was causing them a momentary discontent—unfair banking practices, railroad domination, trusts—and large numbers of the populist farmers would subside and let capitalism go on its way.

It is hard to know what to make of Sam’s beliefs. They probably fell somewhere between populist and socialist. On the one hand, he could write with apparent earnestness, after Franklin D. Roosevelt became president, “This country is owned and controlled by a few bankers and other capitalists and the quicker Mr. Roosevelt takes over all industry the better it will be for the country.” During the same season, his friend and fellow Socialist Arch Cornell was denouncing private ownership by “the few” of mines, mills, shops, storehouses, transportation lines, steamship lines, and electric light and water systems. Whether these Madison County Socialists seriously advocated government ownership of those enterprises is not clear, but it seems fair to infer that they did.

On the other hand, southwestern Socialists like these, while generally more emotionally volatile than their comrades in other regions, tended to be less intellectually doctrinaire. At times, it appeared that they

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20 Madison County Record, March 9, 1933.

21 Ibid., March 16, 1933.

would have been satisfied with a throughgoing reform, rather than a radical rebuilding, of the economic and political system. They were a little like their hero Eugene V. Debs. He embraced socialism gradually, like a swimmer entering a spring-fed pool. Debs had begun as a Democrat and a craft unionist. Then he supported the Populist party in 1896 before joining Victor L. Berger to organize the Social Democratic party. That was the forerunner of the Socialist party, on whose platform he ran four times for president. The Socialists of Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri idolized the fiery but undogmatic Debs. 23

The platform of Arkansas's own Socialist party contained the usual rantings against an unjust economic system, but it also carried a number of reform ideas that in time would be considered middle-of-the-road. Socialists here opposed the death penalty and corruption in elections. They favored the initiative and referendum, woman's suffrage, and the graduated income tax. 24 Sam Faubus worked hard for those reforms. How hard he would have fought in an armed revolution to overthrow the government is anybody's guess. I think he would have stopped far short of that. He was willing to go to prison for his beliefs when he agitated against World War I—and almost did—but I have trouble seeing him at the barricades trying to bring down the government of Calvin Coolidge. Once Roosevelt launched the New Deal, which ameliorated some of the discontents that Sam had suffered, he became a New Dealer. By the time of John F. Kennedy's presidency, he was an enthusiastic Democrat.

Orval became as devoted a New Dealer as his father. The New Deal may seem quaint to today's young liberals, but in its time it stirred fierce emotions. Those emotions had not subsided entirely by the time Orval Faubus became governor. He spent substantially of his political capital to move Arkansas along in its own version of the New Deal, a movement that had been pursued fitfully in the state during the previous twenty years. Faubus most notably stood up to powerful forces—including those of the Delta—and pushed through the legislature a 50 percent increase in the sales tax to finance improved education and other state services. He brought more compassion to the state welfare system. He was generally friendly to labor. He spent state funds generously to improve the lot of the mentally ill and retarded. These and other accomplishments are what he had in mind when he described himself as a true liberal as opposed to the present-day liberal who is concerned—unduly, Faubus believed—with the rights of various cultural, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

One final question remains: If Orval Faubus did not betray his father and the father's idealism, did he then betray his own class? Probably not. The populist, hill-country class that he came from is always ready to forgive the person who escapes it. Far from seeing escape as betrayal of one's fellows, as it was and to some extent remains in the more class-encrusted nations of Europe, rising from one's class is seen with approval in America. Shannon put it this way: "Americans have generally believed it easier and more desirable to rise from their class rather than with their class." 25 Orval Faubus escaped into the world he had dreamed of as a boy, a world of fame, power, and material comfort. He never came close to entering the traditional establishment, but there is no doubt that he learned to traffic with the capitalists and power brokers that his father had hated. It could be argued that far from betraying his class, he fulfilled its secret yearnings.

23Shannon, Socialist Party of America, 266.


25Shannon, Socialist Party in America, 3, 35.