

“This is my stand. . . . I will not compromise.”

In the dog days of 2009, the tea parties and town hall meetings and debates about deficits and death panels have seemed to create a new and greater division of America over social and political issues. It seems the terms “moderate” and “moderation” have been pushed into the shadows as the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have dominated the public discourse and have been brandished as the badges of the battling sides.

I was asked a few months back whether I was a liberal or a conservative. The question put me in mind of an inquiry put to a great Mississippian some 47 years earlier. “You have asked me how I feel about whiskey.” This begins one of the most famous responses about political position ever given by a politician. It was the famous “Whiskey Speech” delivered on April 4, 1952 by then-Representative Noah S. “Soggy” Sweat, Jr., at a banquet while the issue of prohibition was before the Mississippi Legislature. Sweat, who was elected to the House in 1947 at the age of 24, served one term and delivered the speech during his last year in office. His professional and political career included stints as a legislator, district attorney, circuit court judge and college professor, and I had the pleasure of working under his supervision in the Mississippi Judicial College while attending Ole Miss Law School in the mid-1970s. He was a true Southern gentleman.

Judge Sweat died on February 23, 1996 at age 73 in Corinth, Mississippi. As chronicled in his obituary (*The Clarion Ledger, Saturday, February 24, 1996, Jackson, MS, p. 3B*), liquor was illegal in Mississippi in 1952. But the state collected what was called a “black market” tax on it totaling millions of dollars. A banquet for senators, their wives, members of the House and other guests was to be held at the old King Edward Hotel in Jackson.

“Bose Holburn had heard I was working on a universal approach to the whiskey issue. He called me that night and asked me to get up and take a stand on the issue,” Sweat recalled. So, on this contentious issue – in a charged political atmosphere – Representative Sweat stood up and clearly stated his position in the famous Whiskey Speech, which follows here:

“My friends,

“I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey.

“If when you say whiskey you mean the devil’s brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it.

"But;

"If when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it.

"This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise."

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I have long considered myself a moderate. However, reflecting on Judge Sweat's thoughtful reply, I believe I must take a different stand in answer to the question posed to me –

If by liberal you mean the dictionary definitions of “showing or characterized by broad-mindedness; given or giving freely; favoring a philosophy of progress and reform and the protection of civil liberties”; aspiring to a liberality of spirit that will allow me to love others with a Christ-like love that would seek to feed, clothe, heal and visit those who have such needs; to be inclusive of others who have personal, family and community goals and needs similar to my own even though we may have little in common by way of background or experience – then certainly, I call myself a liberal.

But,

If by conservative you refer to the dictionary definition of “conforming to standards and conventions of the middle class”; to one who has been brought up with traditional values and Christian mores and who seeks not to undo but to build on this strong foundation; who would resist change for change's sake, and would advocate keeping the positive values and traditions upon which our country has grown strong; who believes that progress can and should be made without excessive change that would endanger the legal and fiscal foundations of our democracy if conscientious leaders together consider the public good – then, yes, I consider myself a conservative.

That is my stand. I will not compromise.

P.S. A client of our firm, Quentin Whitwell, has published a new book entitled If By Whiskey, a fiction book about a New England liberal that joins a sorority at Ole Miss.

The book is available at Lemuria Bookstore in Jackson or at the website www.ifbywhiskeynovel.com.