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“LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:  
AN ALABAMA MILLENNIUM ESSAY”

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By Glen Browder

It is pretty easy for thoughtful Alabamians to conclude that this has not been “Alabama’s Century”. While the United States has been savoring the success of an “American Century”, our state has spent much of the past one hundred years struggling among and against ourselves. Now, as we face a millennial turning of the calendar, perhaps we should reflect on our collective experience so that coming generations can write a more positive chapter in Alabama history.

If you are already sick of all the hype and hysteria of the New Millennium, you should quit reading here; and anybody who does not like preachy lectures about the Heart of Dixie can go back to video replays of our football glory. Alabama is a great place, but my assignment as we pass this centennial milestone is to take a sober look at our warts and wrinkles.

Therefore, for those of you who are still following this essay, I will try to assess my “Top Ten Lessons” of Alabama’s past hundred years and suggest how those lessons might lead us toward a more savorous Twenty-First Century. The following assessment—based on my three decades as a public official and political scientist—covers the political realities of our current situation and concludes with a recommendation that we start thinking bigger, bolder, and smarter for the next century.

“The Realities of our Current Situation”

Despite all the endearing people and redeeming qualities of our state, the fact is that we have not dealt well with some serious challenges of Alabama history. Whereas America dealt—in positive ways—with World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Revolution during the

Twentieth Century, Alabama responded to our challenges of the same period by instituting political and social shackles upon itself.

My “Top Ten Lessons” are no secret—simply look at the headlines of Alabama history and read what countless native Alabamians have been writing for years about our state. Here, then, in generally historical order, are my “lessons” of Alabama government and politics during the past century:

1. Alabama’s fundamental adversities during the Twentieth Century cannot be blamed on the trauma of Civil War and Reconstruction. Other states that suffered similar historical experiences have recovered and prospered.
2. Nor do our adversities derive from the Federal Government or outside agitators. We created much of our own misery at the beginning of this century by inflicting upon ourselves a defective Constitution (1901) that haunts us even today.
3. Our basic problems since then have been serious societal afflictions—poverty and race—that we have not been able to deal with in reasonable manner.
4. Many of the problems that bedevil us in contemporary politics—such as education and taxation—relate to our constitution, poverty, and race.
5. We have not developed a political party system—a critical component of responsive and responsible democracy—to help us address these problems.
6. Our leaders—in government, business, education, and other societal sectors—too often have failed to fulfill the requisite responsibilities of civic leadership.
7. Furthermore, “we the people” have defaulted as citizens on a regular basis.

8. Unfortunately, there's no magical solution or quick fix in sight; I see no new constitution, no education reform legislation, no tax plan, no big changes at all on our immediate horizon.
9. In fact, we cannot expect Alabama's leaders or voters to solve our problems in the current political environment. We're stuck with the stubborn legacy of a massive systemic mess and cultural resistance to change, forcing us to play the same weak hand that has been dealt to us in the same tough game for the past century.
10. Alabama deserves better. Perhaps we should try something different in the next century.

### “Start Thinking Bigger, Bolder, and Smarter”

I suggest that we start thinking bigger, bolder, and smarter—about fundamental reform of the entire political system—in the Twenty-First Century. While the practical realities of Alabama history necessitate a continued fight for incremental reform, we need to break out of the restrictive box structured by Alabama's “founding fathers” in 1901; we need to encourage a more creative mentality than that of our current political establishment; and we need to loosen the choking grip of popular resistance to political progress.

As a start, I think that we must build an institutional base for systemic cultural change in the next century. I propose specifically that the Governor establish a “Commission on the Future of Alabama”, a public-private partnership designed to encourage civic education and interaction among promising young leaders drawn from the full spectrum of Alabama society. This Commission would be a continuous, self-sustaining entity with a broad civic mission: fostering a culture of positive thinking about long-term public policy for a diverse, dynamic society. Of course, such an endeavor would require the sincere support and input of practical politicians, educators, and numerous other participants in Alabama public life. Thus it would have to be a scrupulously ethical institution without any particular partisan agenda. But I envision that, eventually, it might spawn more directed initiatives that could deal realistically and effectively with the fundamental challenges of Alabama's destiny.

I admit that this commission idea is just a theoretical, slow, and uncertain proposition—but it would be a start in the right direction. My hope is that, over

time and with providence, a “Commission on the Future of Alabama” could help cultivate a progressive civic vision for our state; and it might even grow some enlightened political leadership (and followership) for implementing this vision in the Twenty-First Century.

#### “Conclusion”

Alabama has too many good people and natural potential to keep on struggling just to get by while hoping that things will change. Our problem—at least from my perspective—is that we have not addressed some serious political and societal challenges realistically or effectively during the past century; and we need to start thinking bigger, bolder, and smarter if we hope to convey a better legacy to future generations.