

The News and Observer



I advise and enjoin those who direct the paper in the tomorrows never to advocate any cause for personal profit or preferment. I would wish it always to be "the tocsin" and to devote itself to the policies of equality and justice to the underprivileged. If the paper should at any time be the voice of self-interest or become the spokesman of privilege or selfishness it would be untrue to its history. — JOSEPHUS DANIELS, Editor and Publisher 1894-1948.

This newspaper's opinion

Wednesday, September 29, 1982

A misplaced protest

Has it become obligatory for anyone identified as a civil rights leader to go to jail in Warren County? Judging from the arrest Monday of Congressional Delegate Walter E. Fauntroy of the District of Columbia, it would appear so. Fauntroy was charged with impeding a truck headed for the state PCB landfill.

Instead of interfering with this state's lawful resolution of a problem that has faced blacks and whites in 14 counties, Fauntroy might well be protesting actions of the U.S. Justice Department and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

While Fauntroy was making his pilgrimage to North Carolina, the Justice Department was saying that it might ask the courts to dismantle court-ordered busing plans affecting several major U.S. cities. The nation's chief law-enforcement agency has begun to side with the opponents of the use of busing as one of the permissible tools to bring school systems into compliance with the law.

Instead of kneeling in front of a truck near Afton, Fauntroy could have been back in Washington raising his voice against HUD's proposal to distort the intent of community development block grants. Congress intended these grants to cities to provide benefits for low- to moderate-income people. But HUD wants to back off that requirement.

The Reagan administration has provided plenty of issues for anyone who speaks for poor and black Americans. Look at reductions of general federal assistance for the poor, cuts in student aid, school lunches and other nutrition programs, day care and medical assis-

tance. In the face of all this, the activists center their attention on something in Warren County that essentially is an environmental issue — and an issue on which state government has sought to act responsibly.

Among the participants in the ritual of protest and arrest have been leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Rev. Leon White, the Rev. Ben Chavis, Floyd McKissick, Fauntroy and other civil rights figures. But the larger, tougher demands of political leadership for the black and the poor won't be won by brief personal or organizational publicity shots on the evening news.

It's as if the activists had despaired of getting a handhold on the slippery mass of Reagan rollbacks in social programs. So they were happy to find something in North Carolina — or anywhere — that they could devote their time and energies to.

It's a pity. The activists had their priorities straight when they marched for and worked for the extension of the Voting Rights Act by Congress. But by turning to civil disobedience on an environmental issue in North Carolina, they have ventured far afield from gaining useful political results for their constituents.