MY YELLOW RIBBON TOWN:
A meditation on my country and my home town

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At the outset of my country's "shock and awe" adventurism, I was persuaded that it was both unjustified and potentially disastrous. When Nelson Mandela singled out the United States as a major threat to world peace, I feared for more than our standing in the community of nations. When an acquaintance close to the inner circle of decision makers told me that Iraq was but one of several countries the Administration might have chosen to attack and that the "war on terrorism" would likely involve military action against any Muslim countries that might be supply stations for our terrorist enemies I knew my fears were justified.

What I believed to be true in the spring of 2003 gradually came to be widely accepted. By November intelligence expert Thomas Powers summed up what virtually everyone outside the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz orbit knew: "On the eve of war, and probably for years beforehand," he wrote, "Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and it had no active program to build them." The justification for the war "was not merely flawed or imperfect—it was wrong in almost every detail, and completely wrong at the heart. There was no imminent danger—indeed there was no *distant* danger. Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction to give to al-Quaeda or anyone else."[1]

No president in our history has been the object of such world wide anathema as George W. Bush. Never has American foreign policy been so devastatingly dissected by

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[1] Thomas Powers, "The Vanishing Case for War," *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 2003, pp. 14, 15.

the international press. Never have so many millions of citizens around the world gathered to protest what they call our march to empire. All of which government spokesmen and their media supporters dismissed as anti-Americanism. Which it is not. The Indian novelist Arundhati Roy, among the most eloquent of our foreign critics, pays homage to America's "rich tradition of resistance" and credits today's Americans with being among the most insightful opponents of their nation's policies. History, she says, is giving American dissenters the chance to make their country into something it should be, but is not—a great nation, true to its highest ideals.[2]

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Soon after the Bush regime sent its armed forces into Iraq, wondering like so many others what I could possibly say or do that might make a difference, I set off for my home state of Alabama. My first stop was Monroeville, where the Alabama Writers Forum was holding its annual meeting. I had been invited to talk on a recently published book in which I wrote about the American conviction of our moral and physical impregnability, the myths we held to of our innocence and invincibility. What I had to say was not new, but I thought it was timely.

With varying emphases throughout their history, Americans have stressed the belief that theirs is an exceptional nation, different from and superior to those of the rest of the world. Its ideology of freedom and equality set it above the old world's heritage of feudalism and privilege. With the end of the Cold War it stood like a colossus ready to spread its claimed virtues, the world's only superpower and best democracy, invincible and innocent. After the September 11 attacks the Bush regime depended on these beliefs

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[2] Arundhati Roy, "Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy," a speech at the Riverside Church, New York, May 13, 2003.

shamelessly. When it decided to launch its revolutionary preemptive strike against Iraq it invoked these myths to shield against truths about both past and present.

Monroeville was a good place to be. Those who write and read honest books, I reasoned, should be the vanguard of the movement to unmask falsehoods and reveal the motivations underlying them. I was not disappointed by the people I met there. They were a receptive and lively group of authors, young and old, novices and old hands, poets and novelists and nonfiction writers of all sorts. It was energizing to be in their company. All of them—or at least all of them I heard or spoke to—shared, in one degree or another, my anxieties and warmly endorsed what I had to say about the misleading myths of innocence and invincibility. Like me, they hoped to find a way to stand against the peril to which the Bush regime seemed to be leading us; but, also like me—though they would speak of the power of the written word—they were not sure that what we wrote might make a difference. Writing, however, was our calling. It was what we could do.

My next stop was Fairhope, home of the unique single tax colony on the shores of Mobile Bay. My grandfather, who was its founder and guiding force for more than forty years, was himself a fine writer, a newspaper editor and pamphleteer of rare distinction. But he placed his hopes for reform elsewhere. He wrote that "they that shall make good theories work and prove the value of proposed social solutions by practical demonstration will do far more to move the world than the wisest and most brilliant theorists."[3] His life work was to try to do precisely that, "to prove the value of proposed social solutions by practical demonstration."

As I drove down the black ribbon of highway knifing through familiar red clay banks edging pine forests, my imagination ran back to the fall of 1894 when my grandfather and grandmother, along with their four children, the youngest still in diapers, traveled through the forebears of this same forest, passengers on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad headed for what they had come to call their "promised land." Their fair hopes for creating a city on a hill must have been tried as they neared their destination, a desolate, thickly wooded site high on a bluff on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. Nothing on the route they were traveling could have been familiar to them. How could they not have experienced at least a little anxiety? Family lore, however, has it that my grandfather, just turned thirty-three, was unshakably optimistic, filled with confidence in his ability to create a model community free of the gross exploitation, inequality, and manifold injustices of Gilded Age America. He thought they were realistic when they had named their soon-to-be-founded community Fairhope.

Now I was driving toward the town he had created and directed for forty years and which my father had led for thirty-six more after him. Fairhope was my spiritual home, the place where my values were shaped and my moral compass established. I looked forward to roaming the bluffs above the Bay and the beaches along the shore, and to reflecting once again on the dreams that had been woven into the place of my birth and rearing. I longed for a time machine to transport me to that train, carrying my grandfather along to his destination. We would talk about what he really expected to accomplish and why he had risked so much against such formidable odds.

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[3] Ernest B. Gaston, "True Cooperative Individualism: An Argument on the Plan of the Fairhope Industrial Association," *Liberty Bell*, April 28, 1894. See also, Paul M. Gaston, *Man and Mission: E. B. Gaston and the Origins of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony* (Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1993).

As I reflected on what he had written about the injustices of his America, and on the better world he hoped to create, the dark thoughts I had about my country, now more than a century later, kept intruding. I remembered a passage from one of his early writings in which he lamented that it was impossible to live in his America without becoming enmeshed in one form or another of exploitation or injustice and the abandonment of principle. The pressure merely to exist, he wrote, moved even a good man to turn "his back on what he knows to be his true self and higher convictions [and] to pursue with the utmost concentration of his energies the prize of material gain."[4] It was a world he could no longer abide.

I ticked off a partial list of parallels in my own life:

- The cable that speeded up my internet connection and gave me too many television channels was provided by Adelphia, its founders shown on the evening news carried off for their thievery;

- Health South, the rehabilitation hospital where good women and men helped me recover from a knee-replacement operation, was owned by another set of thieves;

- My telephone service once came from MCI, a division of WorldCom; its executives stole millions and wondered why anyone would want them to grace the presence of our prison system (a fate the worst of them continue to evade);

- My electricity never came from Enron, but I knew many who relied on it and I grieved for the employees sent into poverty and despair by the thievery of its executives;

- I never had the need for an accountant, but kinspersons had once worked for Arthur Anderson, chief facilitating servant of the corporate crooks;

- Family members and friends shopped at Wal-Mart, chief exemplar of the justice of poverty wages and the abuse of labor;

[4] Quoted in Gaston, *Man and Mission*, p. 140.

- My own university rivaled Wal-Mart, housing its well-paid visitors in motels that refused to pay a living wage and paying poverty wages to hundreds of its basic workers.

Like my grandfather, I saw these and other crimes of my day as consequences of the structure of our society and the values that shaped and maintained it, not the aberrant wanderings of a few flawed individuals. They reached so far into every aspect of our daily lives that only a hermit living off nuts and berries in the forest could escape their tentacles. And now, in the midst of war, they were the values we were hoping to impose on our conquered lands. The democracy of which the Bush regime spoke so glibly was married to an aggressive brand of "free market capitalism" that not only permitted, but encouraged this very undermining of democracy. Virtually all of the economic policies it favored—from tax reform to Medicare restructuring—came wrapped in an ideology my grandfather would have called "unnatural and unjust" because it violated the "natural rights" of its citizens, and was "at war with the nobler impulses of humanity, and opposed to its highest development."

In his 1893 call to fellow reformers to join him in creating an alternative, model community, he wrote that "the present social and economic order is doomed. In the height of its marvelous achievements it bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Clear headed economists and warm hearted philanthropists long ago pointed out and denounced its enormous waste of human energy and natural resources and its hideous injustice and cruelty." Of reformers like himself, he wrote, "the injustice and attendant want, misery, hardships and despair everywhere apparent fill his life with sadness."[5]

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[5] *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 4, 139-140.

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Fairhope was, literally, a city on a hill. Captivated by the beauty of the site, my grandfather wrote lyrically about his first view of it:

> *Here we have a short strip of sandy beach, then a narrow park ranging in width from 100 to 250 feet and covered with almost every variety of shrub and tree which flourishes in this locality—pine, live oak, magnolia, cedar, juniper, cypress, gum, holly, bay, beech, youpon and myrtle. On the east side of this "lower park," as we call it, a red clay bluff rises up almost perpendicularly to a height of nearly 40 feet. Along its serried edge tall, arrowly pines stand like sentinels looking out to sea.*[6]

Those sentinels stood guard over the creation of what the Fairhopers designed to be a demonstration of what they called "cooperative individualism," a guide to a fulfilling life free of the extremes of poverty and wealth, exploitation and unchecked individualism, so tightly woven into the America they were escaping and hoping to reform. Their struggle to achieve these goals went on year after year, often with what appeared to be no hope of success, but they persisted. By the 1920s, the model community cast a small beam of idealism and hope, providing land and opportunity for men and women of modest means and winning accolades from visiting northern writers and reformers.

For a little boy growing up in the Fairhope of the 1930s and 40s, as I did, the fair hopes of 1894 seemed everywhere to have been fulfilled. What such a youngster experienced most immediately in those years was a sense of freedom and security in an environment of harmony and sensuous beauty. The settlement spread back from the water's edge, just as my grandfather had first described it, making its way from the shore line up the cliffs to the gently-rising table land at their summit. Like a nurturing communal park, it was spoiled by no private homes or commercial structures

monopolizing either views or access. In addition to the Bay, the sandy beaches, and the wooded bluffs, there were ravines with red-clay banks and white-sand bottoms that cut through the town; and, not far away, a deep, clear, cold, fresh-water creek, overhung with oak limbs festooned with Spanish moss. These natural treasures were our Shangri-La. Nowhere did we see "private property" or "keep out" signs. Nor was there a big house on a hill or a rich planter or banker to stand over us. The community's special treasures belonged to us all, shielded against the ravages of wealth, power, and privilege.

Inspired by Henry George's belief in land as our common inheritance and his tempered version of the cooperative commonwealth, the Fairhopers joined to their radical economic and social practices equally radical educational ideas. In our "organic" school, as we called it—attending to the whole person, body, mind, and spirit—we found another place of security and freedom. With our broad academic curriculum joined with art, crafts, dance, drama, and music classes, we grew up feeling the school was for us, not that we were to fit into some preconceived notion of what we ought to be or become. The absence of grades, honors, rewards, punishments, and failure in an atmosphere where we and our ideas were at the center of things was something we found stimulating and supportive. We came to learn because we wanted to. We also internalized a lived experience of democracy and equality in ways no civics lesson or history class could teach.[7]

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[6] Fairhope *Courier*, January 1, 1895.

[7] John Dewey visited the school in 1913 and wrote glowingly about it "The democracy which proclaims equality of opportunity as its ideal requires an education in which learning and social application, ideas and practice, work and recognition of the meaning of what is done, are united from the beginning and for all," he wrote. The Fairhope school, he believed, clearly showed "how the ideal of equal opportunity for all is to be transmuted into reality." John and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow* (New York, 1915), pp. 315-16. See also my biography of Marietta Johnson, founder and long-time director of the school, in Paul M. Gaston, *Women of Fair Hope* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), ch. 3.

Somewhere along the way, still a young boy, I learned that all of these blessings were neither accidental nor the natural order of things in the United States, much less in the American South. I have strong memories of my father reading to me the constitution of our community, written by his father, declaring that Fairhope was to be "a model community . . . free from all forms of private monopoly" where its citizens would have "equality of opportunity, the full reward of individual effort and the benefits of co-operation in matters of general concern." On other occasions, my father read to me his father's declaration that Fairhope was designed "to establish justice, to remove the opportunities for the preying of one upon another." In one of his letters he wrote: "We close the gates against injustice; we open them to unselfishness. Society can do no more." These and other colony aphorisms became part of my early learning and consciousness so that I came to feel that we not only had an obligation to struggle for justice but that we were armed with special insights into how it could be achieved. Our lives seemed to be lived with high purpose.[8]

As I turned off the interstate onto the commercially blighted last stretch of highway into Fairhope, dark broodings crowded out my reverie. Musings on the colony's idealistic origins and inspiring early history gave way to melancholy—a sharp sense of loss, sadness over the faded sense of a life once lived with high purpose; the subversion of a reformist mission; and the end of free land that had been Fairhope's *raison d'être*, its road to the realization of the fair hopes of ordinary Americans. At the Monroeville meeting one of the writers, a Fairhoper who lived out in the country, closed the

[8] The quotations and some of the language here may be found in a speech I gave in 1997, later published in pamphlet form: Paul M. Gaston, *My South—and Yours* (Charlottesville, 1997), pp. 5-6.

inscription of her new book to me with the rueful truth that she was "too po' to live in the single tax colony."

Unknowingly, I suspect, what she wrote was a bitter epitaph for my grandfather's dream and my father's life work. Quite apart from all of Fairhope's many charms and attractions—the beauty of the bay, gulleys, pine forests, and tree-lined streets; the vitality of its writers and artists; the visits of the John Deweys, Clarence Darrows, and Upton Sinclairs; the uniqueness and fame of the school; the binding experience of democratic communalism—the colony's fundamental distinguishing feature, the one from which all else derived, was its land policy. Modifying Henry George's single tax theory, the colony owned, and made freely available to its lessees, land which it rented for homes, businesses, and farms. In exchange for the rental payment, the colony paid all taxes levied on the land and improvement of its lessees—a simulated version of George's single tax. Three generations of settlers, most of them men and women of modest means, attributed their material security and sense of personal worth to the free land that gave them their start, all in a culture where land speculation and exploitation were shared anathema.

If my writer friend's inscription provided Fairhope's epitaph, my hair cutter's spirited denunciations nailed down the consequences. I came to the shop (she would never have called it a salon) of this high spirited woman soon after my arrival and almost immediately she began dissecting contemporary Fairhope. She never goes down the picturesque main street, she told me, because "they have too many rich people there building condos they won't even live in." Fairhope, she informed me, "has become a place for rich people." With a sardonic edge in her voice she told me how the previous

mayor had gone on a visit to Carmel, California, to come back with a scheme for turning Fairhope into the Carmel of the Bay. Now, she said, it was filled with all those silly boutiques. Why, she wanted to know, "would anyone spend $500 for a pair of shoes." She didn't mention it, but I couldn't help thinking of one of the new shops for upscale ladies apparel I had seen on my early-morning walk. It was called, without irony, Utopia.

Having no idea who I was (or who my father and grandfather had been) my haircutter's mood expanded. It was plain wrong, she said, for people to be spending all that money, tearing down houses and buildings all over the town to replace them with huge expensive ones; it was plain wrong to be spending all that money "when there are people homeless, people in the streets, people in poverty." Right on, I said silently, wanting to tell her that she was an authentic Fairhoper. Then, turning mellow for a moment, she told me she had once seen a picture book history of Fairhope. It seemed to her that not only had life been simpler then; it had been better. People got along, enjoyed what they had, lived a good life without "all this showing off, this pretension, this looking down on you." Then her coup de grâce: "People like me had a chance back then."

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After my haircut I took a long walk through my old neighborhood, the area now called "the historic district." A block up from the Bay, in front of the home where my mother and her family first lived, and across the street from the park where my father had proposed to her, I exchanged the morning greeting with a fashionably dressed young woman out on a stroll with her dog. We fell into pleasant conversation. Her face lit up with pleasure when I asked her if she liked living in Fairhope. "Oh, yes, indeed," she replied, explaining that she and her husband had moved there just a few years previous,

choosing it because, well, because of its beauty, its charming boutiques and good restaurants. The people were all friendly and, well, she gave a sign of satisfaction, "it is safe." I recalled, but did not mention, *Safe Places East*, a book for retirement-seekers. Fairhope is the only Alabama community it features.[9]

Unspoken in this encounter or in Fairhope booster literature is the enforced whiteness of the town. Almost immediately on their arrival, the founders made a fateful decision to restrict their model community to white people, but they did so in the full knowledge that they were violating the fundamental principle they had set out to demonstrate. When a supporter of the colony raised questions about the exclusion policy, there was no evasion in my grandfather's reply. "The criticism of our friend," he wrote, "illustrates anew the difficulties and differences of opinion arising in the effort to determine how far we can practically go in the 'application of correct theories' within a general condition of applied incorrect ones over which we have no control." Racial discrimination, he agreed, was wrong: "We believe in 'universal equality'—equality of rights"; no man had "more moral or natural right to any particular portion of the earth, the common heritage of mankind, than any other of his fellow men." But when he asked if the colony should "follow the naked principle of equality unreservedly, regardless of existing conditions" he could not advise it. To do so, he believed, would stir the wrath of the neighboring white Southerners and bring to a cruel end the infant experiment.[10]

In the decades that followed, the "existing conditions" that had occasioned the exclusion policy in the first place did not ease. Both my grandfather and my father spoke and wrote against the white supremacy culture, but could not lead the colony or the town

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[9] David and Holly Franke, *Safe Places East* (New York, 1973), pp. 42-69.
[10] Fairhope *Courier,* April 1, 1898.

government to abandon its commitment to segregation. In fact, as the years wore on and new generations were born into and grew up in a world of segregation, many of the singletaxers came to believe that there was no conflict between the principles of their demonstration and the continuation of a whites only policy. By the 1960s one of the most prominent among them was a George Wallace ally and others fell easily in line behind Alabama's most influential white supremacist.

Fairhope's population swelled with newcomers in the last decades of the twentieth century. Few of them knew of or identified with the founding mission. At the same time, the Single Tax Corporation played an ever diminishing role in the life of the town. Its landholdings had not increased significantly for years, the town government now owned and maintained public utilities once identified with the colony, and the rising popularity of the eastern shore drove land values up sharply. The Corporation, unable to diminish land speculation, acquiesced in the transfers of its most desirable lands for huge sums of money. In the midst of all these boom times the town annexed areas to the north where well-to-do white people lived but firmly resisted vigorous demands from black leaders to annex contiguous areas to the south where they lived. The "existing conditions" of the 1890s and 1960s had vanished, but racial mores were now too deeply entrenched—and too little challenged—to permit a reckoning with its history and a righting of its wrongs. It became, almost as never before, an enclave of white people and, increasingly, well-to-do white people.

I continued my walk in silence. Everywhere there was evidence of my haircutter's complaint. Charming homes, authentic reminders of the egalitarian roots of

Nations and driven their historic allies from their side? Why were they in this with so little world support? These questions would come to haunt more of them in the months ahead.

I was joined for lunch that day by one of the old Fairhopers, a woman absorbed with organizing a tour of "historic" homes ("see them before they are torn down"), writing vignettes of Fairhope's golden days, and still struggling to bring the Organic School back to its founding principles. As we reflected on the yellow ribbons and the disappearing homes she recounted the story of a Single Tax stalwart who had told an Elderhostel class that if E. B. Gaston were to walk the streets of Fairhope today he would know that the model community of his dreams had become a reality. We both shook our heads in disbelief, not needing to say that it would be my grandfather's nightmare, not his dream, that he would encounter.

The turning of nightmares into dreams come true was already under way before the Elderhostel lecture. More than a decade earlier, the then mayor, returning from a European trip that filled him with a new vision of Fairhope's future, said that he had "a burning desire to make Fairhope the most beautiful, charming city that you could find anywhere in this country."[11] Beauty and charm. E. B. Gaston had no objection to beauty and charm; indeed, early Fairhopers created the parks, protecting them in perpetuity from private enterprise, and lined the avenues with the magnolias and oaks that gave it the beauty so enticing to the newcomers. But where was the mayor's "burning desire" for free land, for "a model community . . . free from all forms of private monopoly" where its citizens would have "equality of opportunity, the full reward of individual effort and the benefits of co-operation in matters of general concern." There was no such desire,

burning or otherwise. But the author of the popular pictorial history could write that, because of this mayor's "burning vision" and leadership, the " tradition of 'cooperative individualism' is alive and well among us one hundred years after Gaston coined the phrase."[12]

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I left Fairhope unsure of what my days there had taught me about the state of our union. Three out of four Fairhope voters opted for George W. Bush in 2000. By the twenty-first century the South had become the engine driving the Republican Party. The story of how this had come about is complicated, though anchored in the race-based "southern strategy" Nixon launched at the end of the 1960s and the "social issues" strategy his successors added a quarter-century later to woo those at the lower end of the income scale. But Fairhope? Even in conservative Alabama its 75% vote for Bush was nineteen points higher than the state total of 56%.

What seemed to stand out most clearly for me in Fairhope's case was the gradual erosion of the options open to the colony leaders, the inevitable declining significance of its land policy, and then the dissipation of the idealism and vision of most of its remaining members and leaders. All of this made it easy for the molders of the new Fairhope to appropriate the luster and beauty of the historic community and to convert it into a fortified jewel of contented conservatism. We historians write about unintended consequences. I cannot imagine a better example than what I saw in the walks I took through my home town in the spring of 2003. I know my father and grandfather would have felt the same way.

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[11] Quoted in Larry Allums, *Fairhope, 1894-1994: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, 1994), p. 156.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Fortified jewels of contented conservatism exist all over America, of course, more of them in the South than ever before. Flying their yellow ribbons, they have isolated themselves from the historic roots of American idealism and are the backbone of the Bush regime. They will mobilize to thwart regime change in 2004. We who will strive to prevail against them need to keep alive our fair hopes that the call for a revival of our "rich tradition of resistance" will be answered.

For Fairhope it is probably too late to change significantly the voting percentages in 2004, but it is not too late for a tradition of resistance to be rediscovered and made vital. I have written in this essay about the spirit of the woman who cut my hair, but not of the band of writers, artists, and free thinkers that still distinguishes Fairhope from other non-university southern communities. They once set the tone of the model community; they are now the embattled minority. On my last visit one of them showed me a book my grandfather had inscribed to her. "Yours for justice," he wrote. Why don't we stand up for justice again, my friend asked me. It was a good question.