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"Fighting Whiskey and "Fighting Whiskey and Immorality" at Auburn
The Politics of Southern Football, 1919-1927

Andrew Doyle

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in early November 1927, President Spright Dowell of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, today's Auburn University, walked up the gleaming white marble steps of the Alabama state capitol on his way to a special meeting of his school's board of trustees. The single item on the agenda was a

motion to dismiss him from his job. During his seven-year tenure, Dowell had obtained accreditation, raised admission standards, and improved the professional qualifications of the faculty. He had created an administrative bureaucracy and introduced modern accounting, auditing, and purchasing procedures. Prior to his arrival, registration had been a two-week-long nightmare; now it was accomplished in two days. He energetically lobbied the notoriously parsimonious Alabama legislature for increased appropriations, and when sufficient funding was not forthcoming, he orchestrated a fundraising drive that collected over half a million dollars. These funds paid for the construction of nearly two dozen campus buildings and such vital infrastructural needs as a safe and reliable water supply. Yet this solid record was overshadowed by a raging public controversy sparked by the decline of the once-powerful Auburn football program. Dowell had deemphasized football from the beginning of his tenure, and the 1927 team was about to complete the first winless season in school history. Trustees and football boosters publicly criticized Dowell, and a delegation of students met with Governor Bibb Graves to report that the student body had voted overwhelmingly for his dismissal. The trustees responded by mounting a formal investigation, complete with public hearings. The flurry of charges and countercharges paralyzed the campus and dominated headlines for a month, and the trustees now held Dowell's fate in their hands.[1]

Although he likely knew that he had little chance to keep his job, Dowell remained publicly confident as he entered the showdown in Graves's office. In characteristically blunt fashion, he asserted that his achievements outweighed the puerile clamor of a football-crazed mob. He maintained a contemptuous, self-righteous attitude toward the students and alumni who sought his ouster. He regarded **[End Page 6]** as absurd the notion that a winning football program could be the sine qua non of his tenure in office. He should have known better. Like numerous university presidents before and since, Spright Dowell learned that the vicissitudes of football can make or break a collegiate administration. The trustees' meeting was brief and to the point: Dowell was out, effective at the end of the academic year. He had dismissed his critics as an "irresponsible mass" possessed of a "mob spirit," but in the end, the trustees had sided with the mob.[2]

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President Spright Dowell of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, today's Auburn University, instituted several changes that resulted in a raging public controversy over the decline of the once powerful football program. To make matters worse, football at rival University of Alabama was thriving. Alabama's team in the 1926 Rose Bowl game, courtesy of the William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.

The Dowell controversy is partially explained as an episode in the long-running struggle between athletics and academics in American higher education. Dowell was resolutely hostile to big-time intercollegiate football, and he was determined that the athletic tail not wag the academic dog at Auburn. He considered the football program "a continuous problem" that threatened to "sidetrack . . . the more serious work of the institution." He undertook a quixotic campaign to diminish "the unnatural and exaggerated position which [football] occupies in the eyes of the students and of the public." He suggested that intercollegiate sports were no more important than intramural athletic competition, intercollegiate debate teams, student orchestras, the dramatic club, glee club, or agricultural and engineering **[End Page 7]** societies. Dowell seemed to think that if he lectured the campus community and public zealously enough about the dangers of big-time football, he could convince them that their priorities were misplaced. Colleges, he insisted, existed primarily to "train men of character for the business of life," and football "should not be allowed to sidetrack or eclipse the real purpose for which this institution exists." Yet his call for "sober and sane thinking" regarding football was drowned out by the howls of outrage over the downfall of the Auburn football program.[3]

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Trustees and football boosters publicly criticized Dowell, and a delegation of students met with Governor Bibb Graves to report that the student body had voted overwhelmingly for Dowell's dismissal. Graves, courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

A career administrator with a master's degree from Columbia University, Spright Dowell was typical in many ways of the southern business progressives of the 1920s who introduced "the gospel of efficiency" to southern governmental and business institutions. The reforms that he instituted at Auburn systematized and rationalized administrative procedures and brought the school into line with national standards in these areas. Yet he disagreed sharply with most progressive southerners over the issue of intercollegiate football. Following the lead of their northeastern counterparts, many southern business leaders, politicians, and academics saw football as a symbol of progress and modernity. The members of the northeastern elite who invented and popularized American football defined it as the perfect sport for a modern, rationalized, industrial capitalist society. Walter Camp, the Yale coach hailed as "The Father of American Football," Caspar Whitney, the sports editor of *Harpers' Weekly*, Theodore Roosevelt, and many others claimed that football's set plays, hierarchical command structure, and on-field division **[End Page 8]** of labor made it a model of precision, orderliness, and teamwork that replicated the form and function of the modern industrial corporation. Its violence taught the toughness and "virile masculinity" necessary for success in the Darwinian world of corporate capitalism and imperialist competition. In their view, football was the perfect vehicle for inculcating the traits necessary for success in a modern industrial society. The New South progressives who brought football to the South in the 1890s yearned to replicate the northern nexus of factories, cities, and railroads in the region. They embraced social and economic change and welcomed the integration of the South into the American cultural and economic mainstream. Football became identified with the progressive impulse that brought industrialization, urbanization, and a modern bourgeois society with consumerist values to the South.[4]

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Although he likely knew that he had little chance to keep his job, Spright Dowell remained publicly confident as he entered the showdown in Bibb Graves's office. Dowell, courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

Progressivism was a big-tent political phenomenon, but the liberal and left variants of progressivism were weak in the South, even in the academic world. Given the general skewing of the southern political spectrum to the right, the power of socially conservative evangelicals, and the southern legacy of traditional conservatism, the term "progressive" can fairly describe those southerners who supported economic modernization and regional integration into the national mainstream. Yet the more conservative progressives were most likely to support football, while liberals and leftists were much more likely to question its value. E. L. Godkin, the editor of the *Nation*, economist Thorstein Veblen, University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins, the American Association of University Professors, and the Carnegie Foundation were among the steadily increasing number of individuals and groups who rejected the claim that football possessed social, moral, and educational utility. They asserted that it did not build **[End Page 9]** character in young men and argued that it had a profoundly negative impact on academic institutions. By the 1920s, this view was relatively common among left-of-center academics and intellectuals. Few of them, however, resided south of the Mason-Dixon line. Thus, while many nonsouthern college presidents attempting to deemphasize football could count on support from leftists and liberals in their campus communities and among their state's opinion leaders, Spright Dowell could not.

Dowell also stood out among southern college presidents, most of whom strongly supported football. James Kirkland of Vanderbilt, the leading educational reformer in the South from the 1890s through the 1930s, initially believed strongly in the progressive social and educational mission of football. Although he began to deemphasize football at Vanderbilt in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he did so much less radically than Dowell. He also had virtually unassailable authority on his campus and absolute support from his trustees. S. V. Sanford of Georgia, K. G. Matheson of Georgia Tech, John Tigert of the University of Florida, and John Futrall of the University of Arkansas were all progressive university presidents who actively supported football at their institutions. Closer to home, Dowell's rejection of football stood in stark contrast to his two immediate predecessors at Auburn, Charles C. Thach and William Leroy Broun.[5]

Dowell's primary foil, however, was George Denny, the president of the University of Alabama from 1912 until 1936. Denny regarded football as a public relations vehicle that could increase enrollment, gratify alumni, and create popular support for the university. When he took the helm at Alabama, the student body numbered 390, the annual state appropriation totaled less than $50,000, and a majority of Alabamians viewed the university with feelings that ranged from indifference to overt hostility. The Alabama football program was similarly moribund. When Denny retired in 1936, student enrollment had increased to nearly 5,000, and fourteen major classroom buildings and dormitories had been constructed. He created a graduate program, schools of business and home economics, an extension program that enrolled thousands of students throughout the state, and a summer program for teachers that enrolled over 2,000 students annually. The endowment rose from under $500,000 to over $4,500,000. Denny applied a similar drive to building his football program. Along with Georgia Tech, Alabama became one of the first southern teams to become a national power, winning six conference championships and four national championships between 1924 and 1934. Publicity generated by the football program attracted thousands of out-of-state students after the mid-1920s, many from the Northeast. Their tuition payments were a major reason why Alabama remained solvent during the Depression while Auburn was forced at times to pay faculty and staff in scrip. While his autocratic manner and penchant for spending money earmarked for faculty salaries on campus construction projects made him unpopular **[End Page 10]** among his faculty, Denny faced remarkably little opposition to his support for football. A strong case can be made that Denny made a Faustian bargain by fostering rapid enrollment growth and expansion of the physical plant without a commensurate increase in the size or salary scale of the faculty. Clearly impressed with the university's growth and, perhaps, intoxicated by football, students, alumni, and politicians generally gave Denny high marks for his accomplishments and overlooked his shortcomings.[6]

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Dowell considered the football program "a continuous problem" that threatened to "sidetrack . . . the more serious work of the institution." From *Glomerata* (1923), Auburn University's yearbook, courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

Although each university president instituted a modern, rationalized administrative system, Denny used it to further the growth of his football program while Dowell used it to cripple his. Dowell's first step toward that goal was to wrest control of the football program from a small clique of coaches and alumni boosters. As was the case at virtually every other big-time football power, an alumni-dominated athletic association exercised preponderant control over the football program while existing as an independent fiefdom outside the control of university authorities. Denny co-opted and worked in partnership with the Alabama Athletic Association; Dowell declared war on Auburn's. Dowell marginalized the alumni's influence by creating an athletic department within the college's administrative structure, putting the coaches on the college payroll, and appointing an athletic director loyal to him rather than to the alumni. The new athletic policy shifted resources away from Auburn's "highly selective and competitive athletics" and instead encouraged widespread student participation in intramural sports. Intramural teams were given access to the lone campus football field, much to the consternation of coaches concerned about damage to the field and competition **[End Page 11]** for practice time. Coaches were forced to teach several physical education courses, leaving them less time to spend with varsity athletes. When the Southern Conference banned freshman eligibility in 1922, only intense lobbying by coaches and athletic boosters induced Dowell to permit the formation of freshman teams at Auburn.[7]

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Walter Camp, the Yale coach hailed as "The Father of American Football," and many others claimed that football's set plays, hierarchical command structure, and on-field division of labor made it a model of precision, orderliness, and teamwork that replicated the modern industrial corporation. The Yale-Harvard football game, 1905, courtesy of the Library of Congress Photographic Archives.

Dowell also denied funding increases to the football program during an era when the cost of fielding a successful team was spiraling upward. He maintained pre-World War I levels of athletic funding, but he lavished funds on the campus YMCA. In a move that enraged athletic boosters, Dowell forced the Auburn athletic association to contribute $25,000 in five annual installments to the 1922 capital campaign. Athletic department funds were used to cover this pledge after the college assumed control of varsity athletic finances. The athletic department did not have sufficient funds in June 1926 to cover this contribution and was forced to borrow against future football gate receipts in order to do so. To add insult to injury, he refused to use any of the funds he raised to build an on-campus stadium. Denny, by contrast, built an on-campus stadium at Alabama.[8]

These fiscal limitations created significant problems, but the Auburn football program, like the school as a whole, persevered despite chronic underfunding. Dowell's truly crippling blows focused on player recruitment, remuneration, and eligibility. Colleges were nominally obliged to meet impossibly rigid standards in these areas. They were prohibited from offering any compensation whatsoever to athletes, including athletic scholarships. Yet the prestige, public-relations value, and gate receipts generated by a winning college football program inevitably tempted administrators and boosters to offer financial inducements to prized recruits. Schools almost uniformly offered athletes bogus academic scholarships, scholarship loans that were never repaid, and, most commonly, well-paying jobs **[End Page 12]** on campus or with businesses controlled by alumni. Many of these jobs required athletes to do little or no work. In addition, boosters, and sometimes even the coaches, disbursed under-the-table payments to athletes from slush funds. Then as now, hypocrisy was an integral feature of intercollegiate athletics. Colleges remained competitive in the increasingly market-driven world of intercollegiate

athletics while maintaining a putative loyalty to the amateur ideology that originated in the Victorian English class system. These practices began in the earliest days of college sports in the mid-nineteenth century and had become institutionalized before football had even come to the South in the 1890s. The Carnegie Foundation Report of 1929 garnered headlines when it castigated colleges and universities for their widespread subsidization of intercollegiate athletes. Of the 130 institutions examined by the Carnegie investigators, only 28 did not subsidize their athletes. Of these, only 8 had big-time football programs. After a requisite amount of editorial hand-wringing and fervent protestations of innocence by college officials, everyone returned to business as usual.[9]

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Theodore Roosevelt was among those who claimed that football's violence taught the toughness and "virile masculinity" necessary for success in the Darwinian world of corporate capitalism and imperialist competition. Roosevelt, courtesy of Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

Auburn had maintained a relatively good reputation with regards to recruitment and subsidization prior to Dowell's arrival. While no college could comply with these rules and still remain competitive, Auburn had avoided the worst abuses. It had never been known for employing ringers or tramp athletes, and the vast majority of its football players were legitimate students who actually pursued degrees. It had remained relatively unscathed by the football scandals that erupted, died away, and then recurred with monotonous regularity. It did, however, discreetly subsidize its better athletes. Many football players served as waiters in **[End Page 13]** the campus dining hall, a plum position that afforded them both free board and enough income to pay their tuition. Many also received money from a scholarship loan fund, which they often neglected to repay. The active alumni booster network almost assuredly provided cash subsidies to the better players, although records of this are as nonexistent as one might expect.[10]

Auburn's record of coming closer than most schools to meeting standards that few took seriously failed to impress Spright Dowell. There were no shades of gray in his ethical universe. While he admitted in 1922 that "no other institution in the South has had quite so enviable a reputation for so long a period," he remained adamant that major changes must be made. He knew that he could not completely end systematic subsidization of athletes, but he did reduce the number of campus jobs and scholarships available to them. He also insisted that athletes meet all normal academic and disciplinary standards. Football players took full academic course loads during the season, and if afternoon classes conflicted with practice, they skipped practice. A number of football players were expelled for academic deficiencies or for violating the ban on the consumption of alcoholic beverages. No other major southern football power adhered to such a strict policy. Once word of this filtered out, the best athletes began to shy away from Auburn. Dowell compounded this problem by refusing to assist in the recruitment of promising high school athletes, as his predecessor, Charles C. Thach, had done.[11]

Head Coach Mike Donahue chafed at the restrictions placed on the football program. A genial and diminutive native of Ireland whose accent still confounded many southerners despite his having lived in Auburn since 1904, Donahue had overseen Auburn's relatively high ethical and academic standards prior to the implementation of Dowell's more rigid policies. He had graduated from Yale with honors, believed in the concept of "clean sport," and took academics seriously. He had taught both mathematics and Latin at Auburn for a number of years. A beloved and respected figure on campus, he had never had any problems coexisting with faculty and administrators. He also had never been very close to the alumni boosters whom Dowell so thoroughly despised. Yet Donahue had seen enough by the end of the 1922 season, sadly concluding that the football program that he had built was headed for disaster. He left Auburn to accept the head coaching job at Louisiana State University (LSU). Dowell replaced him with John Pitts, a former Auburn football player then working part-time as an assistant coach and part-time as an instructor of mathematics. Pitts continued to receive $1,400 annually for teaching, so the athletic department could get by with paying him only $2,400 for coaching, less than a fourth of the $10,000 that LSU paid Donahue. Also, Dowell possessed greater influence over Pitts, a marginal coaching talent who could never obtain a head coaching position elsewhere, than he would have had over a big-name coach hired from outside the campus.[12] **[End Page 14]**

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James Kirkland (top) of Vanderbilt, the leading educational reformer in the South from the 1890s through the 1930s, initially believed strongly in the progressive social and educational mission of football. Although he began to de-emphasize football at Vanderbilt in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he did so much less radically than Auburn's Dowell. Courtesy of Vanderbilt University Special Collections and Photographic Archives.

[End Page 15]

Predictably, Dowell's actions had a devastating effect on Auburn football fortunes. Donahue's teams had won three conference championships in the seven years prior to Dowell's arrival, and they posted respectable records in 1920, 1921, and 1922. The program floundered, however, under Dowell's recruiting and eligibility restrictions and Pitts's less-than-stellar coaching. In 1924 Auburn finished with a 4-4-1 record, losing four of its five big games against major conference rivals. An alumni faction comprised of leading football boosters waged a noisy public campaign to force Dowell's ouster after the 1924 season. The dissident alumni brought a motion to dismiss Dowell before the board of trustees, but thanks to Governor William W. Brandon's crucial political support the motion failed.[13]

Dowell had dodged a bullet, but this reprieve ultimately bought him only three additional years. He reluctantly appeased his enemies by replacing the hapless Pitts with Dave Morey, a brash young Dartmouth graduate whose talent for self-promotion exceeded his coaching ability. Yet even legendary Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne would have had trouble fielding a competitive team under the conditions established by Dowell. Morey's recruiting efforts were hamstrung by the restrictions on financial inducements, and several of the players that he managed to recruit were kicked out of school for poor grades or for misbehavior. The team remained mired in mediocrity through 1925 and 1926. Disaster struck prior to the opening of the 1927 season, however, when star quarterback Frank Tuxworth was caught sneaking into the women's dormitory after a night of drunken reverie. Dowell was beside himself over this "most unwholesome fraternization between the sexes." Not only was Tuxworth expelled, he was forced to endure a lengthy lecture from Dowell on the necessity of resisting the temptations of the flesh.[14]

Tuxworth's expulsion was Dowell's final and ultimately self-destructive blow to an already reeling football program. Auburn opened the 1927 season with a "warm-up" game against the Hatters of tiny Stetson College, whose nickname could not possibly have been calculated to strike fear into opponents' hearts. The chance of an upset seemed so remote that gamblers did not even give odds on the game. The Auburn team, however, had lost the will to fight, and it suffered one of the most humiliating defeats in its history. One week later, perennial also-ran Clemson defeated Auburn for the first time in over two decades. Clemson students jubilantly rang the campus bell and ignited a bonfire after the news reached their campus, while Auburn students and alumni seethed at this humiliation of their once-proud football program. Morey melodramatically announced his resignation at a pep rally six days after the loss to Clemson. Dowell dismissed this as a "clever stunt" that had inflamed the "mob spirit" of the "irresponsible mass" of students. He was certain that reasonable observers would never take such behavior seriously. In any event, it ignited the crisis that led to his downfall. In an unprecedented **[End Page 16]** challenge to authority, students lit a huge bonfire and plastered the campus with placards bearing the blunt pronouncement "To Hell with Spright Dowell." They also sent emissaries to seek aid from the alumni who had led the fight against Dowell three years earlier. Unlike 1924 the student protesters and dissident alumni found an ally in the governor's office. Bibb Graves had replaced William Brandon as governor in January 1927, and his refusal to support Dowell proved decisive in forcing the latter's resignation.[15]

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Dowell's primary foil was George Denny, the president of the University of Alabama from 1912 until 1936. Denny regarded football as a public relations vehicle that could increase enrollment, gratify alumni, and create popular support for the university, and with his strong support Alabama's program won six conference championships and four national championships between 1924 and 1934. The university's endowment also rose from under $500,000 to over $4,500,000. Denny, courtesy of the William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.

"Four Great Years of Romping Pleasure"

The decline of the Auburn football program was the proximate cause of Dowell's firing. However, the football controversy was intertwined with the larger social and cultural conflicts that beset the South and the nation during the 1920s. Rapid economic growth over the previous half century had extended industrial capitalism, mass culture, and consumerism into a region that remained conservative and devoted to tradition. An emerging urban society built upon the secular gospel of progress and innovation coexisted uneasily with a rural folk culture informed by agrarian work rhythms and evangelicalism. The influential constituencies of major state universities such as Auburn—students, alumni, business leaders, and the urban upper middle class—possessed a generally progressive worldview. In addition to his antagonism toward big-time intercollegiate football, **[End Page 17]** Dowell's position on other issues alienated a critical mass of university supporters. Most unpopular were his attempts to enforce rigid disciplinary standards on the Auburn campus, the favoritism that he showed to agricultural education vis-à-vis engineering at Auburn, and his political ties to the Alabama Agricultural Extension Service and the Alabama Farm Bureau Federation. Each of these factors earned Dowell the enmity of progressive elements within Alabama and thus played a key role in his ouster.

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Auburn Head Coach Mike Donahue had seen enough by the end of the 1922 season, concluding that the football program that he had built was headed for disaster. He left Auburn to accept the head coaching job at Louisiana State University. Courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

Although the scope of these changes is often overstated, the 1920s marked a significant social and cultural watershed in America. The spread of a cosmopolitan worldview, the growing predominance of the consumer culture, and the impact of new technology, including the automobile and the new communications media of radio and movies, all worked to undermine Victorian values. Secularization, especially the gradual removal of religion from its central place in the public sphere, reached something of a critical mass during the decade. The changing social role of women and the concomitant liberalization of sexual mores, what contemporaries called the "Revolution in Manners and Morals," were symbolic of the changes associated with modernity. White middle-class youth were at the vanguard of these changes, and in the process they created the first real youth culture in American history. Seeing themselves as a distinct social group with legitimate rights and unfulfilled desires, they became increasingly unwilling to accept uncritically the authority of their elders. Colleges and universities provided a hothouse atmosphere in which the youth culture flourished, nourished **[End Page 18]** by an intensive exposure to new ideas and values in the classroom and in the new media, and intensified by peer-group reinforcement.[16]

Major southern universities were strongly affected by this cultural transformation. They had changed only

glacially between the end of the Civil War and the 1890s, stubbornly adhering to the classical curriculum and draconian disciplinary standards. The pace of change quickened between the 1890s and World War I, spurred by educational progressives among the faculty. These cautious reformers were taken aback by the tidal wave of student rebelliousness that suddenly confronted them in 1919 and continued unabated throughout the succeeding decade. Auburn students began chafing at what they regarded as unreasonable disciplinary restraints before the ink on the Armistice was dry. Students openly flouted Prohibition laws, and football weekends in Montgomery, Columbus, Birmingham, and Atlanta became occasions for wild partying. Unsurprisingly, student dances also prompted significant alcohol consumption. Students not only had no compunction about publicly admitting their drinking, they bragged about it. The "Scandals" column of the *Orange and Blue*, the Auburn student newspaper, repeatedly chuckled at the alcohol-fueled misadventures of Auburn students during the 1919-20 school year. An unprecedented spirit of militancy galvanized the Auburn student body in the fall of 1919, just as Dowell was taking office. Students posted placards and scrawled graffiti throughout the town of Auburn, hissed faculty and administrators at assemblies, and openly flouted disciplinary rules. The turmoil attracted unfavorable coverage from the state's daily newspapers. The student newspaper concluded, "We may call it unrest or Bolshevism or any of these terms and not miss it so very far."[17]

Bolshevism it was not. The activism of the Auburn students, like that of college students generally during the 1920s, reflected their desire for greater personal autonomy rather than a radical reordering of society. Yet apolitical as it was, student militancy could be extremely disruptive. In response, administrators at most public universities beat a tactical retreat and liberalized disciplinary codes. Dowell, however, resisted fiercely. An intensely pious Baptist, he fought a relentless battle to improve the "moral tone" of the campus. One of his first actions was to crack down on the *Orange and Blue*, installing an editor who supported his agenda and instituting faculty oversight of the paper. The lively and gossip-filled "Scandals" column disappeared, replaced by editorials voicing support for the president's drive to "improve the social and moral life of the campus." It called for students to quit using vulgar language and insistently touted YMCA activities despite their unpopularity among students. It even called for the reinstitution of mandatory daily chapel attendance, a practice that had been extremely unpopular among Auburn students for years and that had been abandoned during the war. Students began calling the newspaper "The Weekly Disappointment." The establishment of a student government, touted as a palliative for student restiveness, **[End Page 19]** instead sparked an abundance of it. Auburn was one of the few major southern universities still without a system by which students had a voice in drafting and enforcing behavior codes. Dowell assured the trustees in 1921 that "we have all but agreed upon a constitution for student government." However, an agreement proved elusive and the pursuit of it divisive. Students overwhelmingly defeated a proposed constitution in a popular vote later that year because they believed that it gave them too little influence over disciplinary decisions. One student complained that without a constitution, Auburn students were relegated to the status of the "ignorant semi-savage Filipino." A constitution was finally adopted three years later, but the long fight generated additional ill-will.[18]

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Dowell insisted that Auburn football players adhere to strict disciplinary standards. A number of football players were expelled for academic deficiencies or for violating the ban on the consumption of alcohol, and disaster struck prior to the opening of the 1927 season, when star quarterback Frank Tuxworth was caught sneaking into the women's dormitory after a night of drunken reverie. No other major southern football power adhered to such a strict policy, including Auburn's rival program at Alabama, where the game was prospering. Alabama players, courtesy of the William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.

Prohibition and sexual morality were the two most divisive issues in the cultural wars of the 1920s, and, predictably, Dowell and the students clashed over them. Any student caught under the influence of alcohol was immediately expelled from school. Dowell reported that his policies were an effective means of eliminating "ne'er-do-well's and incompetents" from the campus. He appointed **[End Page 20]** Zoë Dobbs, a woman who shared his worldview, to the newly created position of social director and gave her broad authority to regulate campus social life. She and her hand-picked team of local matrons closely monitored the school-sponsored dances, keeping an especially close watch for anyone under the influence of alcohol. In a move that particularly rankled the virtually all-male Auburn student body, young women invited to dances were vetted by Dobbs and her cohorts, and any deemed to be of insufficiently high moral character were denied admission. When dances at fraternity houses proved more difficult to supervise than those in the school gym, Dowell banned them altogether. In an attempt to impose stricter control over fraternity life in general, Dobbs began selecting the fraternity house mothers who lived in the houses. Dobbs observed that the new house mothers provided a

"constraining and restraining influence." In addition, Dowell flatly prohibited women from visiting fraternity houses. This rule was enforced so strictly that a young woman was barred from visiting her mother, who was a fraternity house mother. Although Dowell later relented in this particular case, the incident enhanced his reputation for rigid authoritarianism. Dowell also banned movies with strong sexual content from campus. Auburn did not have a privately owned movie theater, so he effectively prevented some of the most popular movies of the day from being seen there.[19]

Auburn students had certainly grumbled about restrictive rules prior to the war, but the level of discontent rose dramatically during the 1920s. Students wanted a significant liberalization of the behavior code, which Dowell was unwilling to grant them. Their anger intensified when they compared their situation to that of their peers at other southern state universities. Exponential advances in communications and transportation, an increasingly pervasive media culture, and the rising generational consciousness that characterized the youth culture increased student awareness of the disparity. In keeping with national trends, authorities at the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, and the University of Alabama liberalized their behavior codes during the decade.[20]

Once again, Alabama president George Denny provided a striking contrast to Dowell. Denny was relatively tolerant by the standards of the day, and Alabama acquired a reputation as a "party school" during his tenure. The university aggressively recruited female students and permitted unchaperoned dating. Female students were even permitted to ride in automobiles with men. Dances became ubiquitous, and the presidency of the Cotillion Club was the most desirable office to which a student could aspire. Denny also adopted a see-no-evil approach to Prohibition violations. An Assistant U.S. Attorney in Birmingham complained to Denny in 1923 about fraternities that openly served liquor at social functions. He implicitly accused Denny of condoning this behavior and threatened to slap the university with an injunction unless he cracked down. Likewise, a student's father asserted that Denny either tolerated drinking or was grossly ignorant of activities **[End Page 21]** that were common knowledge. Denny replied that he believed that it was essential to place faith in his students. "The ideal of a college is not that of a reformatory," he declared. An Auburn student who led the 1927 revolt against Dowell wistfully recalled that he and his friends wished fervently that Auburn had a president who was more like Denny.[21]

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Dowell replaced Head Coach Mike Donahue first with John Pitts (left) and then with Dave Morey (right), a brash young Dartmouth graduate whose talent for self-promotion exceeded his coaching ability. Morey melodramatically announced his resignation at a pep rally six days after a crippling loss to perennial-also-ran Clemson. Courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

The polarization of public opinion over Dowell's policy of rigidly enforced morality reflected the bitter conflict between secular modernizers and religious conservatives during the 1920s. Dowell's opponents tended to be less pious and more tolerant of the youthful rebelliousness and more open sexuality of the Jazz Age. His alumni critics viewed him as a "narrow-minded Puritan" who behaved more like a jailer than an enlightened college president. Students complained that a chat with the president felt like an interrogation and that his "stool pigeons" lurked in every corner of the campus. The urban businessmen who led the movement to sack him almost certainly were church members and did not espouse irreligion and hedonism. However, they were sympathetic to the more modern, materialistic, and secular society of the urban, industrialized South, and they had little use for the moral norms that were rooted in the declining world of the southern countryside. Shortly before the 1927 controversy at Auburn broke, editorials **[End Page 22]** in the *Montgomery Advertiser* and *The*

State of Columbia, South Carolina, displayed the tolerant attitude that many in the urban middle class took toward college life. In prose that was purple even by the standards of the day, *The State* proclaimed that college boys should "have not a good time, but the best time . . . four great years of romping pleasure in the heyday of their youth." It urged college authorities to "let them romp through life a bit, while the coltish nature is still hot with the mettle of the lush pasture." The *Advertiser* approvingly reprinted the editorial, asserting that college students had a "duty" to have a good time. It declared, "We need not take life any less seriously because it is something to be enjoyed."[22]

"A Question of Morals and Nothing Else"

Religious conservatives vehemently rejected this more permissive value system. "Fundamentalism" is a broad-brush term often used to describe the religious backlash to the changes associated with modernism, but it was only one manifestation of the widespread discontent of conservative evangelicals during the 1920s. It wasn't only Fundamentalists who perceived the new culture of the 1920s as rife with immorality and irreligion and desired the restoration of religion to the more prominent social role it once possessed. The *Alabama Christian Advocate*, the official organ of Alabama Methodism, repeatedly railed against the new youth culture and the attendant evils of drinking, dancing, jazz music, dirty movies, and sexual license. Warren Candler, a Methodist bishop and president of Emory University, likened the modern youth movement to the revolt of Absalom against King David. Dowell was no Fundamentalist, believing as he did in the spirit of scientific inquiry and embracing broadly ecumenical beliefs. He also never issued blanket denunciations of the moral shortcomings of young people, and he defended them against those who did. He was, however, a pious Baptist who taught a weekly Sunday school class, relentlessly promoted the campus YMCA despite student indifference, and waged his vigorous campaign to improve the moral atmosphere at Auburn despite the controversy that it generated.[23]

Many pious Alabamians vigorously applauded his efforts. The executive board of the Alabama Baptist Convention unanimously passed a resolution of support for Dowell during the alumni challenge of 1924. That same year, the *Alabama Christian Advocate* lauded Dowell as "first, last and always a Christian gentleman." Evangelical leaders supported Dowell in 1927 as well. The *Alabama Baptist* offered editorial support for him, and the *Alabama Christian Advocate* stated, "One of his traducers is reported to have said that he was 'too Christian,' as though any man who presides over the youth of the State could be too Christian for any save those who, perchance, place other considerations ahead of moral character." Only days prior to Dowell's ouster, Leland Cooper, a campus YMCA employee, **[End Page 23]** beseeched the governor to look beyond the football controversy to the first principles at issue. After regaling the governor with horror stories about the drunken debauchery at student dances prior to his arrival, Cooper stated that Dowell "has been fighting whiskey and immorality ever since he came here." Dowell was unpopular, she declared, because such principled behavior had become unfashionable. She asserted that those who favored a liberalization of moral standards apparently did not care whether or not their sons and daughters grew up to be "men and women of real upright character." "The present fight," she wrote, "is not against President Dowell, but against the principles for which he stands. The fight is purely a question of morals and nothing else." Dowell framed his final argument to the trustees in similar terms. He declared that the question facing the trustees was whether they would stand for "high standards of conduct and scholarship, for law and order, and for social decency; or whether they shall wink at or ignore poor work, unsportsmanlike conduct, the use of liquor, and social immorality."[24]

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Even legendary Notre Dame Coach Knute Rockne would have had trouble fielding a competitive team under the conditions established by Dowell. From *Knute Rockne—All American*, courtesy of Dominant Pictures Corp., National Screen Service Corp., and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

Presuming that his reference to unsportsmanlike conduct referred to the excesses of the football program, Dowell's linkage of football and moral issues is significant. His piety may have informed his opposition to big-time football, **[End Page 24]** which was not uncommon among evangelicals of the era. The southern evangelical leadership had vigorously denounced football during the 1890s and made a concerted effort to have it banned. Football, they argued, was too violent, promoted drinking and gambling, and was a shameless emulation of the materialistic and godless culture of the Northeast. Some argued that it glorified the inherently corrupt and sinful human body. William H. Felton, a Methodist minister who served on the University of Georgia

Board of Trustees, waged a vigorous if ultimately futile battle against both football and dancing at that school in the 1890s, and conservative Methodist bishops did the same at Vanderbilt. Warren Candler banned football at Emory and successfully lobbied the Georgia legislature in 1897 to make playing football a felony punishable by a year on the chain gang, although it was negated by a gubernatorial veto. President John Franklin Crowell of Trinity College made football a key element of his ambitious plans to reform that school. The conservative Methodist bishops on the board of trustees who had vigorously criticized both his brash liberalism and his football program led a successful movement to fire him in 1894. Wofford, Furman, Emory and Henry, and Wake Forest were among the other denominational institutions that banned intercollegiate football around the turn of the century. The campaign petered out in the early 1900s, and all but Emory resumed their football programs. Most urban middle-class evangelicals liked football and simply ignored the leadership. An occasional echo of the old jeremiads lingered into the 1920s. For example, the *Alabama Christian Advocate* blamed the 1924 campaign against Dowell on the "rather freakish and abnormal" public obsession with football, and an aging Bishop Candler occasionally cut loose with a blast at football. It may have lived on in Spright Dowell's value system, however. He had been a senior at Wake Forest when that school banned football in 1895, and this early experience may have influenced his attitude toward big-time football. His campaign to use a reformed Auburn football program as an "opportunity to inculcate moral standards and ideals" and his parallel campaign to improve the "moral tone" of the campus contained strong overtones of religious piety, and he pursued both with an evangelical fervor.[25]

Football's roots in the progressive movement and its growing prominence in the commercial entertainment industry ground it firmly in the same urban middle-class culture that was least amenable to religious conservatism. Dowell's leading critics were the urban businessmen who dominated the alumni association, and his strongest support came from the evangelicals who tended to live in smaller towns and rural areas. This rural-urban tension can be overstated, as Dowell had a graduate degree from Columbia University and was hardly bereft of support in Alabama cities. However, the social conflicts of the 1920s were strongly informed by this dichotomy, and the third of the issues associated with the Dowell controversy is related to it as well: his alumni critics believed that Dowell spent a disproportionate **[End Page 25]**

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Dowell's piety may have informed his opposition to big-time football. Southern evangelical leadership had vigorously denounced football during the 1890s and made a concerted effort to have it banned. Football, they argued, was too violent, promoted drinking and gambling, and glorified the sinful human body. Their campaign petered out in the early 1900s. Collegians from the early 1900s, from the *Chicago Daily News* negatives collection, Chicago Historical Society, courtesy of the Library of Congress Photographic Archives.

share of Auburn's limited resources on the School of Agriculture, to the detriment of engineering programs. He was closely allied with Luther N. Duncan, the director of the Alabama Agricultural Extension Service, which was a semiautonomous body with only loose institutional ties to the college. The Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station, although funded primarily by federal monies, received considerable financial support from the college. Dowell defended this outlay of resources while acknowledging that it placed "a burden upon the treasury of the college." The School of Agriculture received significant funding increases throughout his tenure despite a precipitous decline in its enrollment. In 1923-24, 12 percent of Auburn undergraduates

were enrolled in the agricultural curriculum, whereas only three years later, that figure **[End Page 26]** had fallen to just over 4 percent. The proportion enrolled in the School of Engineering remained steady at over 40 percent during this same period. Ambitious young Alabamians of the 1920s sought educational training that would facilitate their entry into the urban middle class rather than training that would relegate them to the less prestigious and less remunerative life of the farmer. A majority of Auburn students came from rural areas and small towns, but most saw their education as a means of accessing the opportunities offered in the urban industrial economy.[26]

Henry DeBardeleben, a leading Birmingham industrialist and the leader of Auburn's dissident alumni faction in both 1924 and 1927, declared that "a vast number of the leading industrial men in Alabama" were concerned that Auburn was devoting an insufficient level of resources to engineering. As an example, he cited Dowell's refusal to divert resources from agriculture to fund the creation of a program in textile engineering. He complained that Duncan was using the political influence of the Alabama Farm Bureau and the Extension Service to generate political support for Dowell. DeBardeleben was also a member of the first Auburn football team in 1892 and was probably the single most influential Auburn football booster. Haygood Paterson, a Montgomery businessman who was also a leading alumni booster and former Auburn football player, also complained that agriculture received "more than its share of attention" at Auburn. They found it expedient to publicly disavow that their dispute with Dowell had anything to do with football and focused instead on engineering education and the malign political influence of the Farm Bureau and Extension Service. While they obviously cared more deeply about football than they were willing to admit, they sincerely felt that Dowell was pursuing shortsighted and antiprogressive policies in terms of football, disciplinary policy, and engineering education. Gubernatorial politics likely entered the equation as well. Governor William Brandon had been elected with the support of Duncan and the Farm Bureau, and he had supported Dowell in 1924. His successor, Bibb Graves, had been elected despite Farm Bureau opposition, so political calculation presumably played a role in his decision to support Dowell's ouster.[27]

The conflict between progress and tradition in the 1920s South is the common thread running through the complex web of issues underlying the Auburn football controversy. Dowell's supporters tended to be more pious, to dislike intercollegiate football or at least want to curb the excesses associated with it, and to value the traditional mores of the agrarian South. His opponents were mostly urban businessmen who valued football as both commercial entertainment and as a symbol of modernity and inclusion in the national cultural mainstream. While it is difficult to ascertain how great a proportion of Auburn students objected to Dowell's disciplinary policies, those who did were both numerous and highly disruptive. His critics generally possessed more secular values and were more tolerant **[End Page 27]** of the liberalized morality of the Jazz Age than were Dowell and his supporters. Yet Dowell was a determined reformer during his tenure at Auburn, and his opponents were hardly radicals who rashly rejected the received canon of the southern tradition. Dowell's piety did not prohibit him from introducing modern administrative procedures at Auburn, and the more secular worldview of the students and alumni boosters did not preclude them from Christian belief or church membership. Both Dowell and the men who forced his removal from office embodied the sometimes contradictory elements of progress and tradition that coexisted uneasily within the South during the 1920s.

Click for larger view

Football's roots in the progressive movement and its growing prominence in the commercial entertainment industry ground it firmly in the same urban middle-class culture that was least amenable to religious conservatism. Fans at a game, courtesy of the Library of Congress Photographic Archives.

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Notes

1. Dowell either destroyed his personal papers and correspondence or took them with him when he left Auburn, but he did make detailed and (perhaps overly) frank semiannual reports to the board of trustees. Most of the

generalizations made in this essay about Dowell's opinions and sentiments have been drawn from material in these reports, which he personally drafted.

2. Report of the President to the Board of Trustees (hereafter referred to as President's Report), 5 November 1927, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives; *Montgomery Advertiser*, 5 November 1927, 1, 2, 4.

3. President's Report, 22 February 1923, 7; 13 May 1924, 1-2, 9; 14 February 1924, 1-2.

4. On the links between football and corporate capitalism, see Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), esp. ch. 1. For a discussion of the links between football and southern business progressivism in the 1920s, see Andrew Doyle, "Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism," *Southern Cultures* 3 (Fall 1997): 28-51.

5. On Kirkland, see Paul Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 135-36, 140-41; on the other southern university presidents, see Andrew Doyle, "Causes Won, Not Lost: College Football and Southern Culture," doctoral dissertation, Emory University, 1998, esp. ch. 1.

6. Suzanne Rau Wolfe, *APictorial History of the University of Alabama* (University of Alabama Press, 1983), 128-29, and Andrew Doyle, "George Denny, Intercollegiate Football, and the Modernization **[End Page 28]** of the University of Alabama," paper presented at the North American Society for Sport History, French Lick Springs, Indiana, May 2002.

7. President's Report, 22 February 1923, 7; 13 May 1924, 9; Cliff Hare to Thomas Bragg, 1 January 1921, Auburn University Athletic Department Records (hereafter referred to as Auburn Athletic Department Records), File 7, Auburn University Archives; Cliff Hare to W. S. Hurst, 19 October 1922, Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 14.

8. President's Report, 13 May 1924, 8-9; Report of the Director of Student Activities, 13 May 1924, 1 June 1925, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives; Auburn Athletic Association Budget, 1921-22, Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 22; *Mobile Register*, 23 October 1927, 1.

9. For a discussion of the chronic problems that American intercollegiate athletics has faced over the issues of player recruitment and eligibility, see, for example, Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time Intercollegiate Athletics* (Oxford University Press, 1988); for a discussion of the Carnegie Report, see John Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 158-76.

10. B. L. Shi to Carmichael Simmons, 2 September 1909, Charles Coleman Thach Papers, File 44, Auburn University Archives; "Statement of Business, Smith Dining Hall Association," 1 January 1917, Thach Papers, File 98, Auburn University Archives; Cliff Hare to J. P. Illges, 17 September 1922, Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 10.

11. President's Report, 22 February 1922, 8; Cliff Hare to Wellington Brink, 29 March 1923, File 31, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives; transcript of testimony given to the Board of Trustees, 14 October 1927, 21, Dowell Papers, File 15, Auburn University Archives; Cliff Hare to A. C. Crowder, 8 November 1920, Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 5; Hare to J. P. Illges, 26 August 1922; Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 11; A. Clyde Robinson to Bibb Graves, Graves Papers, RC2; G199, File: Schools, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1927, Alabama Department of Archives and History; *Montgomery Advertiser*, 22 September 1927, 7.

12. Sam Hendrix, "Irishman Iron Mike Donahue Built on Heisman's Success," *The Auburn Alumnews* 74 (October 1992): 22; undated clipping from *Birmingham News*, Historical Collection, Series I, File: Mike Donahue, Auburn University Archives; Athletic Department Budget, 1923- 24, Auburn Athletic Department Records, File 30.

13. Alabama Polytechnic Institute Trustees Minutes, 12 January 1925, 11 February 1925, Auburn University Archives.

14. Transcript of testimony of open meeting of Board of Trustees, 14 October 1927, 12-16, Dowell Papers, File 15, Auburn University Archives; President's Report, 5 November 1927, 22.

15. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 September 1927, 6; 8 October 1927, 1; *Atlanta Journal*, 2 October 1927, B-1; President's Report, 5 November 1927, 25.

16. For a discussion of the changing social mores of the 1920s and the impact that they had on college life, see Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (Oxford University Press, 1977); Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (Hill and Wang, 1995), esp. ch. 3.

17. *Orange and Blue*, 31 November 1919, 1; 7 November 1919, 3; 14 November 1919, 2, 3; 6 December 1919, 8; 7 November 1919, 1; 14 November 1919, 2. The works that discuss the transformation of American higher education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally focus on nonsouthern schools. Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the AmericanUniversity* (University of Chicago Press, 1965) is the standard work, but there is no comparable treatment of southern higher education. Institutional histories can offer a view of this process from the perspective of individual schools, although they vary in quality. The best is Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*. **[End Page 29]**

18. On student rebelliousness, see Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful,* 123-67, 194-98; *Orange and Blue*, 21 May 1921, 4; 17 December 1921, 2; 20 May 1922, 2; President's Report, 30 May 1921, 9; *Orange and Blue*, 22 October 1921, 1; 28 October 1921, 2; Report of the Director of Student Activities, 13 May 1924, 4, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives.

19. President's Report, 22 February 1923, 5-8; Report of the Social Director, 1 June 1925, 18 May 1927, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives; *Orange and Blue*, 17 December 1921, 2.

20. Information about the liberalization of behavior codes is from the author's primary research conducted at each of these schools.

21. D. H. Riddle to George Denny, 19 November 1917; Denny to Riddle, 23 November 1917; Jim C. Smith to Denny, 28 March 1923, Denny Papers, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama. William G. Gilchrist, interviewed by Allen W. Jones, Oral History Collection, Auburn University Archives.

22. Leland Cooper to Bibb Graves, 4 November 1927, Graves Papers, RC2: G199, File: Schools, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1927, Alabama Department of Archives and History; Gilchrist interview; *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 September 1927, 4.

23. On the religious climate during the 1920s, see Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, ch. 4; the most comprehensive book on American Fundamentalism is George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford University Press, 1980); *Alabama Christian Advocate*, 13 September 1923, 4; 25 September 1924, 2; 30 October 1924, 3; 9 November 1924, 2, 4; 6 January 1927, 2; Dowell defended young people against what he saw as unfair attacks in his President's Report, 21 June 1926, 8; his ecumenical and generally tolerant religious views are in evidence in the portions of virtually all of his reports in which he discusses campus religious atmosphere and the activities of the YMCA.

24. *Montgomery Journal*, 9 December 1924, 2; *Alabama Christian Advocate*, 18 December 1924, 2; 17 November 1927, 2; editorial from *Alabama Christian Advocate*, reprinted in *Alabama Baptist* 92 (December 1927): 3; Leland Cooper to Bibb Graves, 4 November 1927, Graves Papers, RC2: G199, File: Schools, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1927, Alabama Department of Archives and History; President's Report, 5 November 1927.

25. See Andrew Doyle, "Foolish and Useless Sport: The Evangelical Crusade Against Intercollegiate Football, 1890-1920," *Journal of Sport History* 24 (Fall 1997): 317-40; *Alabama Christian Advocate*, 9 November 1924, 2; President's Report, 13 May 1924, 9.

26. President's Report, 22 February 1923, 2; 13 May 1924, 1; Report of the Registrar, 9 May 1927, File 13, Dowell Papers, Auburn University Archives.

27. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 18 December 1924, 4; Alabama Polytechnic Institute Trustees Minutes, vol. 7, 143-44; *Montgomery Advertiser*, 11 December 1924, 2.