

# “Bear Bryant: Symbol for an Embattled South”

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This paper covered the period from 1961 until 1966 in the career of University of Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. College football had long been a source of collective pride and self-respect to many Alabamians. The southern legacy of poverty, defeat and outsider status within the larger American polity left the state with a powerful longing for a symbol of success and virility. There is abundant evidence that the University of Alabama football team had played this symbolic role since the 1920’s. The bitter but futile struggle to preserve segregation had exponentially increased these feelings of rage and powerlessness felt by most white Alabamians. The overwhelming success of Bear Bryant and his all-white teams of the early 1960’s proved to be a powerful symbolic counterpoint to people who considered themselves hounded and harassed by unsympathetic outsiders.

This paper focused on how most white Alabamians saw Bryant as a virtual demigod who was able to salvage the honor of a society that was being forced to alter many of its most cherished traditions. Alabamians and other southerners saw Bryant’s championship teams of 1961, 1964 and 1965 as a vindication of white supremacy and a victory that they were unable to duplicate in the political arena. When Bryant was accused by the *Saturday Evening Post* of conspiring to fix a game, whites of all classes and backgrounds reacted with absolutely rabid defensiveness. This paper thus analyzed Bryant’s role as a cultural icon in a society that was being shaken to its foundations.