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***Everybody Concerned Looks Ridiculous:* Alabama, Auburn, and the Politics of College Football, 1893-1948**

The University of Alabama and Auburn University have historically possessed one of the most intense football rivalries in the nation. The Alabama and Auburn teams played one another twelve times between 1893 and 1907, but the level of hostility between the two schools became so intense that they broke off all athletic relations between 1907 and 1948. Neither behind-the-scenes negotiations nor overt political pressure could effect an athletic rapprochement during the four decade hiatus. This paper explores the social and cultural significance of the Alabama-Auburn football rivalry between 1893 and 1948. It also focuses on the political pressures that finally brought an end to the “forty year pout.”

The Alabama-Auburn football rivalry derived much of its intensity from the historical legacy of class conflict among white Alabamians, the institutional identity of each school being intimately linked to the divergent social origins of their respective constituencies. The University of Alabama was founded to educate the scions of the antebellum planter class, and the school maintained a self-consciously elitist character until well into the twentieth century. Auburn, on the other hand, drew its students from significantly lower socio-economic strata. After 1893, this rivalry was given flesh and blood expression on the football field where Alabama-Auburn games aroused intense passions. Hard feelings over such issues as on-field fisticuffs and the perennial allegations of professionalism exacerbated an already brimming reservoir of suspicion and hostility until in 1908, the schools failed to agree on terms for a game contract, and no game was held. While neither side sought a long term cessation of athletic relations, Alabama and Auburn did not engage in any form of intercollegiate athletic competition for the next four decades, although both at various times tried to resume the series.

Finally, in 1944, governor Chauncey Sparks orchestrated a campaign of public pressure and private maneuvering aimed at forcing a recalcitrant Alabama administration into renewing the rivalry. Sparks’ campaign was partially an attempt by a colorless politician to stir a little popular support among the state’s numerous football fans, but his actions also served to repay a political debt he owed to Auburn president L. H. Duncan. Duncan had fashioned the Alabama Agricultural Extension Service into a formidable political machine, and he had mobilized its network of county agents in support of Sparks’ 1942 gubernatorial campaign. Sparks’ effort was unsuccessful, but it struck a responsive chord among the public. Alabamians who had never been to either college believed that they possessed a proprietary stake in the football teams of their leading state universities. In 1947, the Alabama legislature responded to this popular sentiment and passed a joint

resolution calling for a resumption of athletic relations. The stubbornness of the Alabama administration melted in the face of its need for money to build new facilities to accommodate the flood of veterans pouring into the university after World War II. Operating under a sometimes comical veil of cloak-and-dagger secrecy, the presidents of the two schools negotiated an end to the football feud. Alabama and Auburn have played annually since 1948.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, college football witnessed a number of similar feuds between traditional rivals. None of these, however, proved as enduring as the forty-one year interruption between Alabama and Auburn. Class distinctions between the two institutions created a climate of hostility which made such an extended feud possible. The increasing level of popular interest in college football during the 1920s should logically have placed sufficient pressure on state politicians to force a rapprochement by the end of that decade. The political influence of Alabama alumni forestalled the inevitable for two additional decades, but grassroots sentiment among rank and file football fans eventually prodded the state's political leadership to force a resumption of the series in 1948.